In 1961, the Air Force took its first step into a very long war.

# Farm Gate

By Darrel Whitcomb

*In this photo, a US T-28 wearing South Vietnamese markings flies over Vietnam in the early 1960s.*

In the long history of the Cold War, early 1961 stands out as a particularly tense moment. The Soviet shootdown of U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers had taken place a few months earlier. In the divided city of Berlin, pressure was building. Then, on Jan. 6, 1961, Nikita Khrushchev gave a speech that truly inflamed the East-West political conflict.

The blustery Soviet premier declared Moscow's support for communists engaged in "wars of national liberation." Khrushchev said the Soviet Union would "help the peoples striving for their independence" through the overthrow of pro-Western governments in these brushfire wars. It was an open challenge to the West, and officials in Washington took it exactly that way.

Also listening carefully was President-elect John F. Kennedy, then only two weeks away from his Jan. 20 inauguration. Kennedy knew that the Soviet leader, though bombastic, often backed up his words with actions. He also knew that Moscow already was supporting a communist insurgency in South Vietnam. The US had supplied economic and military aid to the South Vietnamese ever since the 1954 partition that produced two nations—North Vietnam and South Vietnam.

In reaction to what he saw as a major new Soviet provocation, Kennedy called for a review of the situation, and, in a few weeks, the government had completed its work. A report was written by USAF Brig. Gen. Edward G. Lansdale, an expert on counterinsurgency. The Lansdale report warned that South Vietnam was being overwhelmed in a guerilla war waged by an estimated 15,000 well-supplied Viet Cong irregulars.

Now alarmed, the new President signed off on National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) No. 2. The memorandum directed the US military services to develop counterinsurgency forces capable of resisting the inroads of such Soviet-backed guerrillas. In response to NSAM 2, Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, then Air Force vice chief of staff, directed officers at Tactical Air Command to form an elite unit able to conduct such missions.

### "Jungle Jim"

TAC officials on April 14, 1961, activated the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron (CCTS) at Hurlburt Field in the panhandle of Florida. The unit had a designated strength of 124 officers and 228 enlisted men and took the logistics code name "Jungle Jim," a moniker that rapidly became the nickname of the unit.

It would be a composite force of World


Photo via Warren Thompson

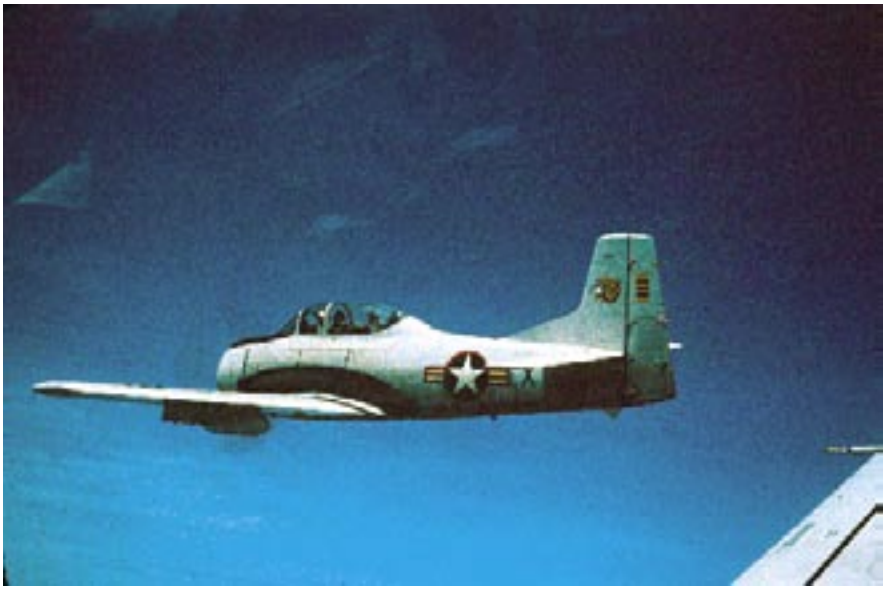

Photo via Warren Thomposon

War II aircraft: 16 C-47 transports, eight B-26 bombers, and eight T-28 fighters. The declared mission of the unit would be to train indigenous air forces in counterinsurgency and conduct air operations. The unit would be commanded by Col. Benjamin H. King, a veteran of World War II and a recognized combat leader. He was handpicked by LeMay.

The new unit would be volunteer only. LeMay put out a notice to all commands: "You will request volunteers from the list of active duty officers, appended this notice, for assignment to Project Jungle Jim, temporary duty, which may include combat."

One listed officer, Lt. Col. Robert L. Gleason, was attending the Air War College at Maxwell AFB, Ala., when he was told to report to the base commander's office. The commander asked him a series of questions, cautioning him not to repeat them to anyone.

Two questions in particular grabbed his attention: Would you be willing to fly and fight in support of a friendly foreign nation in situations where you could not wear the US uniform, and would you be willing to fly and fight on behalf of the US government and to agree to do so knowing that your government might choose to deny that you are a member of the US military, or even associated with this nation, and thus might not be able to provide you with the protection normally given to a US citizen?

Gleason answered in the affirmative, but he was told nothing more.

A month or so later, he received orders assigning him immediately to the 4400th CCTS at Hurlburt. On arrival, Gleason found a few others who looked as puzzled as he was. King welcomed them by saying, "All I can promise you are long hours and hard work in preparation for what lies ahead." They were told that they were to become a special operations forces unit and that they would be called "air commandos."

Later, a team arrived to conduct psychological evaluations designed to identify unstable personalities who might not be able to handle the rigors of the assignment. One pilot, Capt. Richard V. Secord, concluded that the Air Force only wanted "crazy guys." That was a good thing, he thought, and he was happy to see that he somehow fit the profile.

The unit also began training with Army Special Forces to work out airlift and fire support procedures. Several missions were flown to Ft. Bragg, N.C., creating a strong bond between the two groups. Flight training for the T-28 and B-26 crews focused on air-to-ground gunnery. At the specific direction of King, the air commandos honed their skills for night operations.

The 4400th commandos were never told where they would be going. Most speculation focused (erroneously) on Cuba.

### Into Vietnam

As the military conditions in South Vietnam continued to deteriorate, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara actively began to consider dispatching military forces to test the utility of counterinsurgency techniques in Southeast Asia. In response, LeMay pointed out that the 4400th was operationally ready and could serve as an Air Force contingent for that force.

On Oct. 11, 1961, President Kennedy directed, in NSAM 104, that the Defense Secretary "introduce the Air Force 'Jungle Jim' Squadron into Vietnam for the initial purpose of training Vietnamese forces." The 4400th was to proceed as a training mission and not for combat at the present time.

And the mission was to be covert. The commandos were to maintain a low profile in-country and avoid the press. The aircraft were configured with South Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) insignia, and all pilots wore plain flight suits

Photo by George Rose via Warren Thompson

***Farm Gate crews entered the Vietnam War with a secret mission, odd operating rules, and old aircraft. A Farm Gate T-28 is at top; above is a B-26. Both have South Vietnamese Air Force markings, similar to USAF roundels. Combat missions required a South Vietnamese national in the rear seat.***

Photo by George Rose via Warren Thompson

***Combat operations began at Bien Hoa Air Base, South Vietnam. The former French colonial facility was in poor condition by the time the US arrived in 1961. This 1964 photo shows the flight line, where the steel-plank runway needed constant repair.***

minus all insignia and name tags that could identify them as Americans. They also sanitized their wallets and did not carry Geneva Convention cards.

Such subterfuge was a necessity. In dispatching the air commandos to South Vietnam, the United States was violating the Geneva Accords of 1954 that established the two Vietnams. The American leadership wanted to be able to plausibly deny that it had military forces operating in the South.

The deployment package consisted of 155 airmen, eight T-28s, and four modified and redesignated SC-47s. The unit later received B-26s from a repair facility in Taiwan, where they were being rebuilt for the mission.

The unit would be officially titled Det. 2A of the 4400th CCTS, code named "Farm Gate."

On Nov. 5, 1961, the Farm Gate detachment at last departed Hurlburt for Southeast Asia. The four SC-47s flew to Clark Air Base in the Philippines. The eight T-28s flew to California where they were disassembled, packed on C-124s, and flown to Clark; after reassembly there, they and the SC-47s were flown to Saigon and then Bien Hoa Air Base 20 miles north of the capital. All of the initial aircraft were in place by the end of November. The B-26s arrived in late December after modifications in Taiwan.

The airmen of Farm Gate were not impressed with the Bien Hoa facility. Built by French forces, the old colonial airfield was in bad shape. It had one 5,800-foot steel-plank runway in constant need of repair. The American presence at Bien Hoa was, of course, strictly hush-hush, and the airfield was off-limits to the press.

In those first weeks, the commandos belonged, administratively and operationally, to the Air Force section of the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) Vietnam. They would turn out to be the nucleus of an expanding Air Force and American presence in Vietnam.

### Headgear

While settling in at Bien Hoa, the Farm Gate troops noticed that some Vietnamese soldiers were wearing "bush" hats similar to the traditional hats worn by Australian troops. Finding them superior in jungle conditions to the US-issued baseball caps, the Americans began to buy and wear their own bush hats. Even King had one.

Within days of arrival, the T-28s and pilots were ready for orientation flights. The Farm Gate pilots launched with VNAF escorts and delivered their ordnance, but, when mission reports were reviewed, the crews were told not to conduct independent air operations. The cover story was that the Americans were in-country to train South Vietnamese pilots.

On Dec. 26, 1961, Washington issued new regulations directing that all Farm Gate missions would include at least one South Vietnamese national onboard every aircraft. McNamara further amplified this requirement by stating that the Vietnamese would fly in the backseat position.

Training was a facade because, at least in the beginning, the South Vietnamese pilots did not need much training. Participants knew the backseat rider requirement was political, but, as the demand for VNAF pilots grew, the experienced ones returned to their own units and the replacements actually were unskilled. Many were cadets awaiting orders to flight school.

One SC-47 pilot, Capt. Bill Brown, recalled that his Vietnamese riders "never were allowed anywhere near the controls of the aircraft."

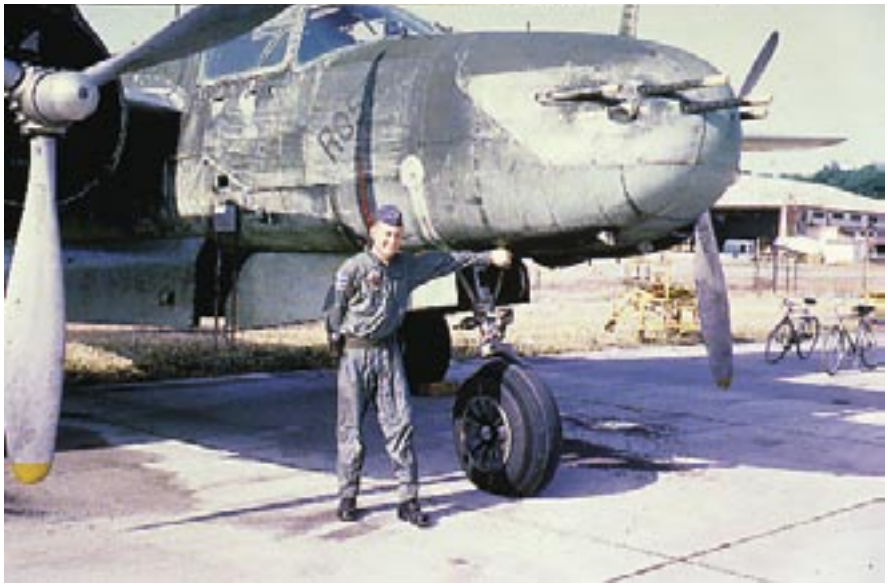

Photo by George Rose via Warren Thompson

***Capt. John Cragin poses with a B-26 in this 1964 photo. In 1962, McNamara reluctantly ordered additional B-26, SC-47, T-28, and U-10 aircraft to Vietnam.***

Photos via Warren Thompson

Americans, with Vietnamese aboard, were soon flying to destroy Viet Cong supply lines and forces. Flying from Bien Hoa and air bases being improved up-country at Da Nang and Pleiku, T-28 and B-26 operations emphasized "training" for reconnaissance, surveillance, interdiction, and close air support missions.

The SC-47s began flying airdrop and "psyop" leaflet and loudspeaker broadcast missions to forward bases where the Army's Special Forces teams were working with the rapidly growing South Vietnamese Civilian Irregular Defense Group.

## Command Confusion

Command and control of Farm Gate became confused in early 1962, when all Air Force units in Vietnam were reorganized under 2nd Advanced Echelon (2nd ADVON) of 13th Air Force, which had been activated the previous November. The assigned mission was to conduct "sustained offensive, defensive, and reconnaissance air operations aimed at the destruction or neutralization of Viet Cong forces, resources, and communications within the borders of South Vietnam."

Accordingly, the 2nd ADVON detachment commander at Bien Hoa tried to take operational control of the Farm Gate group. King said this violated the guidance that LeMay had issued when he set up the unit.

When King tried to resolve the operational control issue at the new 2nd ADVON, he was told by the operations officer that, under their plan, the Farm Gate aircrews would probably not be able to fly daytime combat sorties. King, however, was not going to allow anyone to prevent his unit from engaging in combat operations.

***Farm Gate's SC-47s conducted "psyop" leaflet and loudspeaker missions. The T-28 and B-26 operations focused on reconnaissance, surveillance, interdiction, and close air support. In the above photos from 1962, a B-26 performs a low-level strike.***

At the time, the VNAF only had one squadron that could perform air strikes, and it was not properly equipped for night flying. King, however, had trained his men for night operations. He directed his weapons officer, Capt. John L. Piotrowski, to obtain some flares. (Piotrowski later rose to four-star rank and served as Air Force vice chief of staff and commander of NORAD and US Space Command.) Maintenance troops then rigged one of the SC-47s to drop the flares and validated the tactics.

Later, a South Vietnamese outpost came under night attack. An SC-47 and two T-28s took off and struck the enemy force by the light of the flares. The timely air strike broke the enemy's attack and drove those forces from the field. This became a successful tactic for nighttime operations, as the communist forces often disengaged at the mere sight of the flares.

A few weeks later, King returned to the United States and was replaced in command by Gleason. The unit was visited by the US Pacific Command commander, Adm. Harry D. Felt, who immediately noticed the distinctive Farm Gate headgear. He was not impressed. Felt made it clear that the bush hats had to go. Gleason saluted smartly but sent a back-channel message to Hurlburt concerning the admiral's wishes. Twenty-four hours later, he got an official message from Air Force headquarters saying that the hats had been designated official headgear for the members of the unit. It was signed by LeMay.

## First Loss

In February 1962, a Farm Gate SC-47 on a leaflet drop mission in the highlands near Bao Loc was shot down, killing the six airmen, two soldiers, and one Vietnamese crewman on board. This was the first of several Farm Gate losses.

As additional Air Force units were sent to Vietnam, 2nd ADVON was deactivated and replaced by 2nd Air Division of 13th Air Force. Parallel to the growth of Air Force units in South Vietnam, the VNAF also was expanding. More pilots were needed, and the cadets flying in the backseats were sent off to flight school. To continue the backseat


***This SC-47 was part of the initial deployment to Bien Hoa, and—like the T-28 at far right—was repainted in VNAF colors. The transport was even given a new tail code: The O-15773 replaced USAF's designation of 43-15773.***

subterfuge, however, many South Vietnamese noncommissioned officers were rounded up and forced to fly.

Enemy attacks were increasing across the countryside, and there were rising calls for air support to embattled ground troops. Forward operating locations were opened at Qui Nhon and Soc Trang. Commanders at 2nd Air Division could see that the South Vietnamese Air Force could not meet all needs, and they increasingly turned to Farm Gate crews to fly the sorties.

Realizing that he needed more assets, the commander of 2nd Air Division, Brig. Gen. Rollen H. Anthis, asked for additional Air Force personnel and aircraft for Farm Gate use. Anthis wanted 10 more B-26s, five more T-28s, and two more SC-47s. McNamara reviewed the request, but he was cool to the idea of expanding Farm Gate units for combat use. His goal was to build up the VNAF so it could operate without American help. Still, McNamara approved the request for additional aircraft and also assigned two U-10s to Farm Gate.

Shortly thereafter, McNamara directed the commanders in Vietnam to develop a national campaign plan to defeat the Viet Cong. The plan, finished in March 1963, called for a much larger VNAF. The South Vietnamese Air Force was to increase its force structure by two fighter squadrons, one reconnaissance squadron, several squadrons of forward air controllers, and several more cargo squadrons.

The year 1963, however, had started ominously with a serious defeat of South Vietnamese troops at the village of Ap Bac in the Mekong Delta. Civilian and military leaders realized the Vietnamese were not ready to fight on their own.

The war continued to spread as enemy forces grew. By June 1963, the United States Air Force presence in Vietnam had grown to almost 5,000 airmen. As the buildup continued, USAF directed the activation of a new outfit—the 1st Air Commando Squadron—at Bien Hoa. To preclude the need for an increase in personnel, it would absorb the Farm Gate men and equipment. The airmen began to prepare for the reorganization. But the missions continued, and on July 20, an SC-47 crew flew an emergency night mission to Loc Ninh and, disregarding enemy fire, strong winds, and blacked-out conditions, landed and rescued six severely wounded South Vietnamese troops. (The SC-47 crew would receive the Mackay Trophy for the most meritorious air mission of 1963.) Eight days after the Loc Ninh mission, the 1st Air Commando Squadron was activated and Farm Gate was subsumed.

The term "Farm Gate," however, remained in use a while longer for certain logistics pipelines. Eventually, it was replaced by other code names as the war effort continued to expand and diversify. "Things just got bigger," one crew chief later explained. "It wasn't Farm Gate anymore. It was war."

US forces certainly were engaged in combat. However, even after the 1st Air Commando Squadron took over Farm Gate, the public legal status of the operation was ambiguous. According to the then-commander of Pacific Command, Adm. Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, US forces as late as July 1964 were still officially carrying out "an advisory mission, and our personnel were not participating in military action at [that] point." That fiction would disappear with the passage of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in August 1964.

Between October 1961 and July 1963, 16 Farm Gate air commandos were killed. Also lost were one SC-47, four T-28s, one U-10, and four B-26s.

Within a year of its establishment, 1st Air Commando Squadron had shed its B-26s and SC-47s and grounded some of its T-28s after two more went down due to catastrophic wing failures. According to retired Lt. Col. W. Dean Hunter, a pilot who flew T-28s throughout this period, the T-28 section lost a total of 36 pilots in the war. Some pilots were awarded medals for heroism—from the Air Force Cross to Silver Stars.

The unit was re-equipped with AD-6s, later renamed A-1s. It would continue to fly combat operations until its final mission on Nov. 7, 1972, over northern Laos.

Farm Gate can now be seen for what it really was: the first step in a very long war. One can fix the exact date of its start. In a real sense, however, it had no precise end date. Farm Gate simply was absorbed into the larger US war effort. The parent unit, the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron, was deactivated in 1969. During the course of its official life, however, the outfit spawned 11 different squadrons, several wings and groups, and the Special Air Warfare Center, which inherited the original Jungle Jim mission.

Indeed, Air Force Special Operations Command today traces much of its lineage to Farm Gate. It is the heritage of the air commandos. ■

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