

From before Dien Bien Phu to the fall of Saigon, USAF played a major role in the fight against the forces of Ho Chi Minh.

Air War Vietnam



This F-105D Thunderchief, en route to targets in North Vietnam in July 1966, carries 2,000-pound bombs that appear enormous even on that huge fighter. Here, several "Thuds" and a KC-135 execute a complex refueling operation. The F-105 and KC-135 are just two in a long list of US Air Force aircraft indelibly identified with air war in Vietnam.





USAF's entrance into the war was inconspicuous; Washington approved sending a mobile control and reporting post to Tan Son Nhut AB, near Saigon, and, on October 5, 1961, a detachment of the 507th Tactical Control Group from Shaw AFB, S. C., began operation. Involvement grew with the arrival of Det. 2A, 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron, at Bien Hoa AB in November 1961, marking the start of Operation Farm Gate. Flying modified T-28s (as at left), B-26s, and C-47s, USAF crews began training 25 Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) pilots in bombing, rocket firing, and gunnery. The 155-man unit had 16 aircraft, all in the yellow-and-red VNAF markings. Soon, Farm Gate crews were flying combat missions—reconnaissance, close air support, and surveillance. By early 1963, Farm Gate had grown to 275 USAF personnel and 40 aircraft.

In early 1962, USAF began Operation Ranch Hand—aerial spraying missions to defoliate jungles that provided natural cover to the Communist Viet Cong. Ranch Hand rapidly grew to comprise 19 UC-123Ks, and its crews flew against heavy anti-aircraft and small-arms fire. The first Air Force aircraft lost in the war was a Ranch Hand C-123, which crashed on February 2, 1962, killing all three crew members. Conceived as a "limited" plan, Ranch Hand lasted nine years.

By 1963, 15,000 US military advisors were in Vietnam. Bombers began targeting the North in August 1964, after reports that North Vietnamese ships had attacked US Navy destroyers Maddox and C. Turner Joy in the Gulf of Tonkin.

Airfields around Saigon became busy places, as US equipment and personnel poured in. The C-121 at lower left in this photo, identifiable by its signature triple tail, is unloaded alongside three C-124s and a civilian 707.



The war featured a surprisingly wide variety of fighters, the first being F-100s, F-102s, and F-104s. A small number of F-102s began flying air defense missions in 1962. At left are two Delta Daggers complete with pilot helmets resting on intakes, ready to scramble. At first, fighter numbers were small and crews rotated out every 90 days, but they clearly presaged the future, as did aerial refueling operations. On June 9, 1964, four KC-135s (nicknamed Yankee Team Tanker Task Force) from Clark AB, the Philippines, refueled eight F-100 fighters on their way to strike Pathet Lao air defense sites in Laos, the harbinger of feats to come.

As 1965 began, the Viet Cong, who had attacked Bien Hoa AB and detonated a bomb in a US billet in Saigon, staged more attacks. The year saw an abrupt transition for US forces in Vietnam. The advisory role was retained and training went on, but the US now was engaged in direct combat. In February 1965, Strategic Air Command deployed two B-52 squadrons to Andersen AFB, Guam, and, two months later, four O-1 squadrons stood up in Vietnam. In October 1965, the first F-100 squadrons moved to Bien Hoa and Da Nang, followed by F-4Cs at Cam Ranh Bay. The number of US military personnel in Southeast Asia jumped from 23,310 in 1964 to 184,314 in 1965.

The war drew in other Southeast Asian nations. By the mid-1960s, North Vietnam and the Viet Cong in the South had planted bases in eastern Cambodia. (President Nixon in 1969 ordered their bombing and in 1970 launched a ground incursion against them.) By the end of 1964, USAF had begun a series of limited air campaigns to disrupt operations of Communist Pathet Lao in Laos. Thailand provided key bases (see map).

The map shows the Ho Chi Minh Trail, over which Hanoi moved critical war materiel and combatants through Laos and Cambodia to the South. The trail began in the North and threaded through key passes, among them Nape (1), Mu Gia (2), and Ban Karai (3). Another key pass was the Barthelemy, further north (4). On March 2, 1965, USAF launched Operation Rolling Thunder, sending 20 B-57s and 25 F-105s against targets in North Vietnam. By September 1965, US aircraft had mounted 4,000 strikes against radars, rail lines, highways, trails, and bridges in the North. USAF also carried out Operations Steel Tiger, Tiger Hound, and Commando Hunt, aimed at interdicting Communist forces in Laos.



Hanoi began expanding the trail in 1959. Though long in use, it was until then little more than a footpath. With a 30,000-man work force, North Vietnam developed the mountain paths into what later became a network of roads. When the project began, it took months to travel the trail from North Vietnam to the road's end, west of Saigon. By 1975, the same trip took less than a week. This junction of the network suggests how difficult it was to strike at targets on the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Ralph DeClairmont via Warren Thompson

In Vietnam, close air support called for an aircraft able to carry a great deal of ordnance and deliver it well. Early in the war, USAF units flying the lightly armed T-28s were re-equipped with the far sturdier, though still Korean War-era, A-1E Skyraider. Despite its technological age (it had been developed for the Navy at the end of World War II), the A-1 proved to be a serviceable ground-attack weapon throughout the war. Maj. Bernard F. Fisher used an A-1E like the one at right in his daring rescue of fellow A-1 pilot, Maj. D. Wayne Myers, from the A Chau airstrip in March 1966. Fisher received the first of 12 Medals of Honor earned by Air Force members in Vietnam.



Robert Kelsey via Warren Thompson

Robert Tolstead via Warren Thompson



In adapting to the war, Air Force special operations forces often took innovative steps. A close relationship between these pilots and the ground forces they supported was the catalyst for ideas like one from Capt. Ronald W. Terry, who in late 1964 spurred the effort to convert the C-47 into a lethal gunship. At left is the first FC-47, nicknamed "Puff, the Magic Dragon" because, with its three side-firing 7.62-mm Gatling guns blazing at night, it resembled a dragon spitting fire. Troops on the ground welcomed the withering firepower that the gunships brought to a battle. Their success set the stage for the development of new types—the AC-47, AC-119, and AC-130.

Air Force gunships were significant tactical innovations. The "Spooky," "Shadow," and "Spectre"—as they were called—not only provided close air support for ground combat troops but also flew night interdiction missions along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Working with C-130s and C-123s as flareships to spotlight truck parks and troop concentrations, they delivered fire in sweeping lefthand "pylon turns." At right is a view of the side-mounted Miniguns firing from an AC-47. As the gunships evolved, so did the ordnance. AC-130s, developed in 1968, were armed with four 7.62-mm and two 20-mm Bofors cannons. They had infrared sensors, radar, low-light-level television, and laser designators to mark targets.





The F-100 Super Sabre proved to be a multipurpose workhorse in Vietnam, with a long list of ordnance for missions ranging from close air support and "Wild Weasel" work to bridge busting with AGM-12 Bullpup guided missiles. F-100s and F-4s even served as armed forward air controllers—"Fast FACs." The FAC made an invaluable contribution, whether in the fast movers or in O-1s, O-2s, or OV-10s. It was a dangerous job, always exposed to enemy fire.

Above, Capt. Thad Crooks prepares for a mission in November 1967. At right, a 615th Tactical Fighter Squadron ordnance crew prepares a fighter-bomber for its next mission. Below, with target in sight and loaded with napalm, an F-100 from the 35th Tactical Fighter Wing goes after the enemy in December 1967.



Photos Thad Crooks via Warren Thompson





SAC U-2s first detected surface-to-air missiles in North Vietnam in April 1965. In July, a Soviet-built SA-2 downed an F-4C, opening a new chapter in air warfare. USAF and industry responded with "Wild Weasel" radar-suppression aircraft. F-100Fs, packed with electronics to locate SAM sites, were armed with four internal 20-mm cannon and 2.75-inch rockets (and later with missiles) to attack radar and missile sites. By November 21, 1965, the first of seven F-100F Wild Weasels had arrived at Korat RTAB, Thailand, forming the nucleus of the 6234th TFW (Wild Weasel Detachment). Their missions were known as Iron Hand strikes.

The first Wild Weasel success came in late 1965 when Capt. Al Lamb and Jack Donavon destroyed a SAM site during a Rolling Thunder strike on the railyard at Yen Bai, 75 miles northwest of Hanoi. Upgrades led to equipment installed on two-seat F-105Fs and later F-105Gs. At left, two Weasels armed with Shrike antiradar missiles refuel from a KC-135.

The men flying the F-100 Weasels were the pioneers. Only the very best pilots could handle the mission. They were complemented by equally skilled electronic warfare officers, who had to withstand the stress of high-G maneuvers in a potentially fatal environment while operating the new radar warning systems. The F-100s were flown in four-ship flights, often with an F-105 escort. Weasels—whose motto was "First In, Last Out"—were vulnerable to the high density of antiaircraft fire in the area of SAM sites.

At right are photos taken by F-104 pilot Capt. Mike Korte, of the 435th Tactical Fighter Squadron, as he and a second F-104 pilot flew with two SAM-hunting F-105Gs. The first shot shows the layout of a typical missile-launch complex surrounding the controlling radar. The SAMs launched on the F-104s. Korte tracked them with a camera and at the last moment did a split S to avoid being hit. He held his camera over his shoulder to get the lower photo showing the explosion of one of the SAMs, which missed its target.



Mike Korte via Warren Thompson

The F-111A, the first USAF aircraft with variable-swept wings, arrived in Thailand in March 1968 on its first combat deployment, called "Combat Lancer." Things soon turned rocky; despite 51 successful missions, three aircraft were lost and the F-111 was withdrawn from action. Four years later, however, the Aardvark returned to Southeast Asia and soon proved deadly efficient. The all-weather F-111s played a key role in Operation Linebacker in May 1972, attacking SAM sites, airfields, and marshaling yards. They went on to impress many, including the Viet Cong, who referred to the F-111s as "Whispering Death."



Tom Garmisch via Warren Thompson

Via Robert F. Dorr



Vietnam was the scene of widespread use of helicopters, which transported troops and supplies, evacuated wounded, were modified into gunships, and performed reconnaissance and search-and-rescue missions. At left, a Bell UH-1F from the 20th Special Operations Squadron keeps its engine running at Ban Me Thuot, South Vietnam, in 1968.

That year was a watershed for the US war effort. The North Vietnamese and Viet Cong launched the Tet Offensive in January 1968, with simultaneous attacks on major cities and military bases. Tet was, in fact, a crushing disaster for the Communists, who suffered 45,000 dead. Yet this victory in the field for US and South Vietnamese forces was portrayed in the US media as a massive victory for the North. Tet eroded US public support for the war and split the Democratic Party. President Lyndon Johnson halted the bombing and announced he would decline to seek reelection in November 1968.

In November 1970, US forces attempted to free US POWs with a surprise raid on Son Tay prison west of Hanoi. Though it did not succeed, it was one of the most notable and heroic rescue efforts of the war. Search-and-rescue teams performed countless other acts of heroism, often under fire, to retrieve downed pilots and aircrew. At right, pararescueman Sgt. Charles P. Vogeley (in wetsuit) and Sgt. Dennis M. Richardson attend to F-4C pilot Col. Devolet Brett in an HH-3 Jolly Green Giant, after rescuing him from a bailout in the South China Sea on December 17, 1967. At far right: Although Brett wasn't a regular smoker, he was happy to accept a cigarette from Vogeley after this mission, during which his aircraft was hit by enemy ground fire. Brett's back-seater, Capt. Myron Smith, did not survive, but the rescuers did recover his body.



USAF photos by Sgt. Robert F. Wilowski via Lt. Gen. D. Brett, USAF (Ret.)



USAF photo

The Viet Cong hated the B-52 more than any other weapon, for the first warning of its presence was an explosion of bombs in a huge corridor. On June 18, 1965, B-52s flew their first strikes, called "Arc Light," against a guerrilla camp in the South. In November, B-52s began close-support operations, driving off the Viet Cong at Plei Mei. B-52s were soon dropping 8,000 tons of bombs a month on Viet Cong targets. Sortie rates rose to 1,800 per month.

In 1965, a massive program called "Big Belly" was established to increase the capacity of B-52Ds. Maximum bomb load was raised to 54,000 pounds when the Stratofortress was carrying all 500-pounders.

At right is a view of the two-mile-long eruption of earth that a B-52 could inflict—often without warning, since a typical three-ship cell flew high enough to be undetectable from the ground. B-52s brought this bombing power to the battles of Ia Drang Valley in November 1965, Khe Sanh in 1968, and An Loc in 1972. During Operation Linebacker in mid-1972, the bombers destroyed strategic sites in North Vietnam until missions were cut back in response to political factors. When peace negotiations broke down in December 1972, President Nixon launched Linebacker II against Hanoi. The December raids featured concentrated use of B-52s. The assault is credited with forcing Hanoi to accept a military stalemate and sign the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973.



Photo by Darrel D. Whitcomb



USAF photo

USAF FACs were deployed to Vietnam in 1961. They acted as local air commanders, flying over the battlefield in light, propeller-driven aircraft. They maintained radio contact with ground forces and strike aircraft, provided target descriptions and locations, and marked targets.

Armed only with phosphorous smoke rockets and the pilot's .45-caliber pistol and M16, they were vulnerable targets themselves. In 1967, O-2s replaced O-1s, and the next year USAF introduced OV-10s like the one at right.

Precision guided weapons also debuted in Vietnam, perhaps most memorably when F-4s armed with Paveway laser-guided bombs knocked down the Paul Doumer Bridge. A massive structure—8,467 feet long—the bridge over the Red River was defended by 300 guns and 81 SAM sites. It had survived 113 attacks from F-105s. In Linebacker in 1972, a single F-4 attack with "smart" weapons knocked it out.



Photo by Daniel D. Whitcomb

A. J. Merrick via Warren Thompson



Big and sophisticated, the F-4 Phantom II made a name for itself in Vietnam: F-4s scored the first USAF air-to-air victories of the war (against MiG-17s). In an F-4, Col. Robin Olds became the first and only Air Force ace to achieve victories in both World War II and Vietnam. And all of the USAF Vietnam War aces flew F-4s. The aircraft was designed as an interceptor, relying on radar-guided and heat-seeking missiles to bring down its quarry. It also doubled as a strike aircraft, like the F-4C in the foreground at left, armed with a full load of bombs. Along with the striker are an RF-4C (on the tanker) and an F-4E, the latter there to provide CAP. The Phantom's size, weight, and initial lack of an internal gun put it at a disadvantage in a dogfight, but its speed and power allowed it to perform rolling, up-and-down maneuvers to successfully combat MiGs.

Unlike the early F-4s, the F-105 always had a gun, as shown in the destruction of a MiG-17 (right). In Operation Bolo, led by Robin Olds January 2, 1967, F-4s masquerading as F-105s lured MiG-21s into the biggest aerial battle of the war up to that time. The MiGs reacted as expected and came up behind the US fighters, which they presumed were bomb-laden F-105s. To their surprise, they encountered F-4s, with their tanks already jettisoned and ready to fight. In the space of a few minutes, seven MiGs were shot down, Olds himself getting two of his four victories in Southeast Asia.



USAF photo via M. F. Winter



Between 1962 and 1973, USAF delivered more than seven million tons of passengers and cargo within South Vietnam. The versatile C-130 dominated airlift operations in the war after 1965 and took on many roles, including gunship, flareship, Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center, and medical evacuation. Above, a Hercules delivers a pallet using the low-altitude parachute extraction system developed in the early 1960s for pinpoint aerial deliveries. For airlifters, too, flight operations in Southeast Asia required new tactics. Crews flew visually whenever possible, looking for breaks in the cloud cover and staying underneath low ceilings. They adapted to hostile conditions, dangerous terrain, and crowded ground- and airspace, relying on their own wits and judgment.



Between August 1964 and January 1973, 1,740,000 Air Force personnel served in the Vietnam War. USAF casualties numbered more than 3,500.

Only one percent of US personnel wounded in the war died after reaching a medical facility. The key to the high rate of survival was aeromedical evacuation linked with medical advances. The Air Force's specialized aircraft like the C-9 Nightingale and long-range transports, such as the C-5 and C-141, brought the patients to quality medical care in time to save them.

After nearly five years of on-again, off-again negotiations and secret talks, cease-fire agreements were finally signed in Paris on January 27, 1973. The last of the released US POWs left North Vietnam in March. Col. Laird Guttersen, below right, returned to US soil on March 17, 1973, after five years of captivity (including 27 months of solitary confinement). Though a signatory of the Geneva Convention of 1949, North Vietnam murdered and tortured American POWs and paraded them before reporters for propaganda purposes. The photo of Guttersen's homecoming is a reminder of an issue still unresolved—the full accounting for POWs and those missing in action in Southeast Asia.



USAF photo



USAF photo

Via David Frog



For many Air Force members, the Vietnam War symbolically ended well before the family's warm welcome home. It came when they received a heartfelt cheer and the traditional hosing down from squadron mates at the completion of their last mission in-country. At left, an F-105 crew celebrates their survival in a long, complex, and difficult war. ■