

The A-26 Nimrods and the Secret War in Laos

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THE WARFRONT IS THE FIRST OF A NEW SERIES REFLECTING ON COMBAT EXPERIENCES OF USAFA GRADUATES. GIVEN THE ONGOING WAR ON TERROR AND THE PROBABILITY OF MORE AND MORE GRADUATES FACING COMBAT, WE THOUGHT IT ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT TO ALLOW GRADUATES AN OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE THEIR STORIES WITH ONE ANOTHER, AS WELL AS THE CADET WING. IF YOU HAVE A STORY YOU WOULD LIKE TO SUBMIT FOR CONSIDERATION, PLEASE SEND IT TO US AT EDITOR@USAFA.ORG.

Except for USAF Air Commando and Special Operations combatants who fought in the Vietnam War, and the A-26 pilots and navigators who flew the incredible A-26A Counter Invader in the “Secret War in Laos” in 1966-69, few Americans are familiar with the Nimrod story. I hope you have had an opportunity to read classmate Col. (Ret.) Jimmie Butler’s article titled “USAFA’s Forward Air Controller Heritage” in the *Checkpoints* publication dated December 2007. In that article, Col. Butler describes the key Forward Air Controller role that thousands of courageous Air Force pilots and navigators played 24/7 over the battlefields of Southeast Asia. I consider this article to be a natural follow-on to Col. Butler’s article. The A-26 Nimrods had the highest respect for FAC crews during combat operations, and routinely teamed up with FAC crews to locate and strike targets. Even today, we are proud of that common heritage, and we are truly humble about our “certain brotherhood” that served during the Vietnam War.

As I write this article, I am mindful that I am addressing a tough audience. You might fairly ask, what relevance or significance does U.S. Air Force FAC and strike aircraft operations in the Vietnam War have to do with the military operations and the education of U.S. military professionals today? My short answer—and I’m certain Col. Butler would agree—a lot! For recent graduates or current cadets, the military history you are exposed to at the Academy forms a key part

of your foundation. There are important “lessons learned” that can be derived from studying military history. Technology always changes over time. Human character and courage remain almost constant over time. In my judgment, the education I received at the Academy (in all of its many facets) formed my foundation as a career military officer. The technical skills I learned in flight school enabled me to become a highly effective crewmember. The need for clear and strong leadership, and the need for highly trained and courageous warriors, are military constants for all generations.

I had the privilege of being an A-26 Nimrod, a member of the 609th Air Commando Squadron (renamed the 609th Special Operations Squadron in the summer of 1968). The A-26 Nimrods had clear and strong leadership, and the crewmembers had all the training and courage you could ever hope for in a combat squadron. The Nimrods had a real passion for flying. And they had one thing more—once they started flying combat missions out of Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand—their shared sole purpose was to help win the Vietnam War.

I felt so strongly about the Nimrod story that I recently wrote a book about the experience. The name of the book is *The Nimrods*, and you can check it out at books.google.com or amazon.com. I wrote *The Nimrods* because I didn’t want the Nimrod story to be lost and forgotten. I wanted to pass the story on to my family, and





An A-26 (B-26K) with full load of ordnance over SEA (1968). Note the only code "TA" and serial number 671 appear on the vertical tail section. No U.S. insignia appeared on the aircraft because they were part of the "Secret War in Laos."

to the families of other Nimrod combat aviators. I also wanted to make the story available to Air Force historians and students, and hopefully, to the American public. I acknowledge in the first chapter of the book that I can never do justice in attempting to describe the Nimrods. But here, in an abbreviated form, I will try.

The A-26 Nimrod crews operated out of Nakhon Phanom (NKP) RTAFB, Thailand, from 1966 to 1969. We were called the Nimrods because our call sign for radio communications was "Nimrod" and a specified number (e.g., Nimrod 11 or Nimrod 24). According to Genesis in the Old Testament, "Nimrod" was "a mighty hunter before the Lord." If you consult a dictionary, the term "Nimrods" means hunters. That is a perfect definition for the combat role we were assigned in the Vietnam War. We were hunters. Each A-26 crew could act as its own FAC, or we could team up with other FACs (air or ground) to locate and strike targets. We often teamed up with FAC aircraft with the call sign Nail (O-2s), Candlestick (C-123s) and Blind Bat or Lamplighter (C-130s). We were most effective when we teamed up with other FAC aircraft because if another FAC aircraft could locate and mark the targets, we could focus our time and efforts on taking out those targets. The Nimrods had the privilege of flying a "classic" U.S. Air Force combat aircraft.

In the September 2007 issue of *Air Force Magazine*, the A-26 Invader is displayed as an Airpower Classic aircraft (see page 136). I believe

that designation is well deserved. The A-26 is reportedly the only U.S. Air Force combat aircraft to have seen service in three wars: World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. The A-26s that were flown in combat out of Nakhon Phanom RTAFB in 1966-69 were the end of the line for this classic aircraft. Douglas Aircraft Company manufactured a total of 2,446 A-26 aircraft during World War II. Commander of the Army Air Forces, General H. H. ("Hap") Arnold was a strong A-26 advocate because he believed the improved performance of the A-26 over its predecessor (the Douglas A-20) would enable the A-26 to replace obsolete A-20, B-25, and B-26 (Martin Marauder) medium bomber aircraft. The A-26s and their crews experienced their greatest test during World War II as the Ninth Air Force flew them into the intense flak environment of central Europe. During the Korean conflict, B-26 crews were credited with 55,000 combat sorties and the destruction of hundreds of enemy vehicles, railway cars and locomotives.

After experiencing wing failures pulling out of dive-bombing passes early in the Vietnam War, the Air Force awarded a contract to On Mark Engineering Company of Van Nuys, Calif., to remanufacture 40 A-26 aircraft according to certain specifications. The wings were substantially rebuilt and strengthened by the installation of steel straps on the tops and bottom of the spars. Each aircraft was fitted with two Pratt & Whitney 2500 horsepower R-2800-52 water-injected engines with fully reversible automatic feathering propellers. Eight new under-

wing pylons were added to carry various munitions and stores. Eight .50 caliber forward-firing machine guns were added to the aircraft nose section. The top and sides of each aircraft were painted in a dark green jungle camouflage pattern, and the bottom of each aircraft was painted black. Without the crucial On Mark modifications, Nimrod crews could not have carried out the demanding dive-bombing missions over the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The Nimrod mission in the Vietnam War primarily centered on attacking and destroying enemy truck convoys, troops and supplies as they left North Vietnam, traveled through Laos, and engaged in troop deployment and re-supply operations supporting North Vietnam Army and Viet Cong (Vietnamese communist) guerilla forces operating in Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam. The Nimrod armed reconnaissance mission also included combat close air support flight operations in support of U.S. Marines and U.S. Army combat units operating in South Vietnam, and in support of Royal Laotian and Hmong combat units opposing NVA and Pathet Lao (communist) forces in Laos.

Beginning in 1966, in an effort to avoid detection and U.S. air strikes, almost all North Vietnamese truck convoy activity occurred at night. Hence, the Nimrod A-26 combat crews operated almost exclusively at night. Due to the rugged terrain, frequent bad weather and heavy anti-aircraft defenses, the nighttime dive-bombing missions were extremely demanding. We routinely teamed up with U.S. forward air controller aircraft, and when possible, we loved to combine air strikes with B-57 (call sign Redbird and Yellowbird) strike aircraft. However, on many nights, A-26 Nimrod and AT-28 Zorro aircraft operating out of NKP were the only attack aircraft working with FAC aircraft in Steel Tiger. A-26s were uniquely well suited to be effective in nighttime attacks on truck convoys and enemy troops because of heavy and diversified armament loads (eight wing stations, bomb bay, and eight .50 caliber machine guns in the nose section), and because ample aircraft fuel reserves enabled A-26s to loiter in the target area five hours or more.

Steel Tiger was the primary area of operations for the Nimrods. Steel Tiger was a military code name for a combat area comprising much of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a vast network of roads and trails in eastern central Laos extending several hundred miles from North Vietnam north of the Demilitarized Zone south through Laos to South Vietnam and Cambodia. The Ho Chi Minh Trail passed through terrain in Laos that was alternately limestone karst (jutting mountainous terrain), triple-canopy jungle, and grassland. The North Vietnam name for the Trail was the Truong Son Strategic Supply Route (named after the long mountain chain that separates Vietnam from Laos). Until President Nixon acknowledged in 1970 that U.S. aircraft had been, for several years, engaged in flying interdiction missions along the Trail in Laos, the war in Laos was considered by both sides to be the "Secret War in Laos."

Barrel Roll was the other major area of operations for the Nimrods. Barrel Roll covered a very large geographical area in northern Laos, extending from the Plain of Jars eastward to the North Vietnam border. While we only had to fly 40 or 50 miles east of NKP and the Mekong River to reach the hot combat areas in Steel Tiger, we needed to fly more than 100 miles north just to reach the combat areas in Barrel Roll. Although we didn't give it much thought while we were flying missions, Hanoi was only about 100 miles east of Sam Neua located in

Right: A view of an A-26 with full ordnance load along the Mekong River.

Far Right: A view of the flight line at Nakhon Phanom RTAFB (1966-69). (Courtesy AI Shortt Collection)

the northeastern part of Barrel Roll. In Steel Tiger, we generally operated from the Mu Gia Pass on the North Vietnam and Laotian border, south past the DMZ, and further south to Saravanne. We also flew combat missions into parts of North Vietnam and South Vietnam adjacent to Steel Tiger and Barrel Roll.

Three superb A-26 leaders stand out in my memory from my combat tour in 1967-68. The first great leader was Lt. Colonel Howard Farmer, our squadron commander in 1967. He was our squadron commander when I reported for combat duty at NKP in November of 1967. His *forte* was that he was an outstanding A-26 combat pilot, and he was an outstanding teacher to newly assigned pilots and navigators. The second great leader was Lt. Colonel John Shippey, our squadron commander in 1968. His *forte* was that he was an outstanding A-26 pilot, a Korean War veteran, and a giant among combat leaders who inspired teamwork and who aggressively fought to win. The third great combat leader was Major Bobby J. Sears ("Pappy"), the incredible pilot and natural leader that I flew with during most of my combat missions in the Vietnam War. All of those great combat leaders are simply unforgettable. I describe Colonel Farmer, Colonel Shippey, and "Pappy" Sears in more detail in *The Nimrods*.

No doubt, there were many other outstanding leaders who flew and fought with the Nimrods before and after my tour. Lieutenant Colonel Bruce Jensen, the squadron commander immediately preceding Lt. Colonel Farmer, was killed-in-action on his next-to-last scheduled combat mission over Northern Laos in the summer of 1967. Our squadron commanders led by example: they took the same risks and flew the same demanding combat missions as the rest of the squadron.

Two other giant USAF combat leaders stand out in Vietnam War history. Colonel Heinie Aderholt (later Brig. Gen.), commander of the 56th Air Commando Wing, provided the same level of inspirational leadership to the Air Commando (Special Operations) forces operating out of Nakhon Phanom RTAFB that Colonel Robin Olds (later Brig. Gen.) provided to the F-4C Phantom fighter pilots operating out of Ubon RTAFB, Thailand. Those unconventional, but incredibly effective, combat leaders earned the respect and admiration of every member of their fighting organizations.



The A-26 pilots and navigators who flew in the “Secret War” in Laos had guts. They flew high-risk nighttime dive-bombing missions in aircraft that had no radar, no sophisticated electronic equipment, and no ejection seats. The A-26 pilots and navigators sat side-by-side in the cockpit, and the navigators also performed co-pilot duties. Historians acknowledge that the Ho Chi Minh Trail was the North Vietnamese lifeline that enabled up to a million NVA troops, and their weapons and war supplies, to reach combat areas in South Vietnam, and that the outcome of the war depended in the infiltration of North Vietnamese troops, weapons, and supplies through Laos into South Vietnam. Beginning in 1966, almost all of the North Vietnamese supply truck convoy activity on the trail shifted from daylight operations to night operations in an effort to hide from U.S. air strikes. Thereafter, U.S. nighttime strike aircraft, such as A-26, AT-28, B-57 and AC-130 gunships, became the mainstay of U.S. attack aircraft capability on the Trail at night. The A-26 Nimrod crews arrived on the scene in SEA at exactly the same time that the North Vietnamese military emphasis shifted to nighttime re-supply truck convoy operations down the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The A-26 Nimrod pilots and navigators returned to the fight night-after-night in an all-out effort to destroy the NVA supply trucks bound for South Vietnam and Cambodia, and to provide close air support for friendly ground troops. They faced very formidable AAA defenses, and on many occasions lost aircraft and crews. The A-26 Nimrods were awarded two Presidential Unit Citations during the 1966-69 time period. In his book review of *The Nimrods*, Col. (Ret.) Jimmie Butler, an accomplished author and military historian, stated that: “The Nimrods were the best truck killers in South East Asia until the AC-130s became fully operational in the late 1960s.” That’s a real compliment coming from a fellow combat veteran who flew 240 FAC missions in O-1s and O-2s, mostly over the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos.

In my memory, many military academy graduates were members of the A-26 Nimrods. My ’63 classmate, Michael J. C. (“Mick”) Roth, a Cadet Wing commander, was an A-26 pilot. Mick and I flew several unforgettable missions together. One of my cadet squadron commanders during my fourth-class year, Jack Bright, ’61, was an A-26

pilot. Jack and I flew many memorable missions together. Maj. Gen. (USAFR-Ret) William Cohen, USMA ’59, was an A-26 navigator/co-pilot. Col. Allen Learmonth, USMA ’47, vice commander of the 56th Air Commando Wing, was an A-26 pilot. Lt. Col. Atlee Ellis, USNA, our operations officer during my tour, was an A-26 pilot. To the extent I have been able to discover pertinent information, I believe the following Air Force Academy graduates also flew with the A-26 Nimrods: Roscoe R. Roberts, ’59; Patrick J. Smith, ’60; Robert C. Davis, ’60 (KIA in Laos, March 23, 1969); James L. McCleskey, ’61 (a survivor of an A-26 that exploded in the air and crashed just east of NKP on Feb. 22, 1967); Burke H. Morgan, ’61 (KIA in Laos, Aug. 22, 1967); Ferde P. Arbeit, ’67; Arthur R. Fisher, ’67; John R. Terry, ’67; and Michael King, ’68. On one important point, I have no doubt that all Vietnam War veterans, including military academy graduates, agree that we are truly saddened by the combat deaths of all American warriors who lost their lives in combat in the Vietnam War.

In my opinion, the “lessons learned” from the Vietnam War are more of a political and foreign affairs nature than a military nature. As a freedom-loving nation, we cannot permit another Vietnam to occur with respect to the War on Terror. The stakes are too high. From a “big picture” perspective, the lessons learned are clear: (1) Americans need to be united; (2) Americans need to be patient; (3) Americans need to support our military forces; (4) Americans need to support President George Bush and successors; (5) the American media needs to support our national interest; (6) American politicians need to support our national interest; (7) America must renew efforts for international support; and (8) America and the West must defeat radical terrorists and control Weapons of Mass Destruction (especially nuclear weapons). When the president and Congress commit U.S. military forces to war, we look to the president to approve a military strategy designed to win the war, and we look to members of Congress to support, not undermine, U.S. military warriors who are engaged in combat. ▀

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