

## 537<sup>th</sup> AIRLIFT SQUADRON



### MISSION

#### LINEAGE

537<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron constituted, 24 Sep 1943  
Activated, 1 Oct 1943  
Disbanded, 10 Apr 1944  
Reconstituted and redesignated 537<sup>th</sup> Troop Carrier Squadron (Medium), 26 May 1952  
Activated in the reserve, 15 Jun 1952  
Inactivated, 1 Feb 1953  
Redesignated 537<sup>th</sup> Airlift Squadron  
Redesignated 537<sup>th</sup> Troop Carrier Squadron and activated, 12 Oct 1966  
Organized, 1 Jan 1967  
Redesignated 537<sup>th</sup> Tactical Airlift Squadron, 1 Aug 1967  
Inactivated, 31 Aug 1971  
Redesignated 537<sup>th</sup> Airlift Squadron, 30 Mar 2011  
Activated, 29 Apr 2011

#### STATIONS

Richmond AAB, VA, 1 Oct 1943  
Millville AAFld, NJ, 7 Jan-10 Apr 1944  
Atterbury AFB, IN, 15 Jun 1952-1 Feb 1953  
Phu Cat Airfield, Vietnam, 1 Jan 1967-31 Aug 1971  
Elmendorf AFB, AK, 29 Apr 2011

#### ASSIGNMENTS

87<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group, 1 Oct 1943-10 Apr 1944  
87<sup>th</sup> Troop Carrier Group, 15 Jun 1952-1 Feb 1953  
Pacific Air Forces, 12 Oct 1966  
483<sup>rd</sup> Troop Carrier (later, 483<sup>rd</sup> Tactical Airlift) Wing, 1 Jan 1967-31 Aug 1971  
3<sup>rd</sup> Operations Group, 29 Apr 2011

### **WEAPON SYSTEMS**

P-47, 1943-1944  
P-47C  
P-47D  
Unkn, 1952-1953  
C-7A, 1967-1971  
C-130, 29 Apr 2011

### **COMMANDERS**

LTC Charles C. Smith, 1966  
LTC Robert C. Olsen, 1967  
LTC Gayle C. Wolf, 1967  
LTC George C. Marvin, 1968

### **HONORS**

#### **Service Streamers**

None

#### **Campaign Streamers**

Vietnam  
Vietnam Air Offensive  
Vietnam Air Offensive, Phase II  
Vietnam Air Offensive, Phase III  
Vietnam Air/Ground  
Vietnam Air Offensive, Phase IV  
TET 69/Counteroffensive  
Vietnam Summer-Fall 1969  
Vietnam Winter-Spring 1970  
Sanctuary Counteroffensive  
Southwest Monsoon  
Commando Hunt V  
Commando Hunt VI

#### **Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers**

None

#### **Decorations**

Air Force Outstanding Unit Awards with Combat "V" Device

1 Jan-30 Apr 1967  
1 May 1967-30 Apr 1968  
1 Jul 1970-28 Aug 1971

Presidential Unit Citations (Vietnam)  
21 Jan-12 May 1968; 1 Apr-30 Jun 1970

Navy Presidential Unit Citation  
Vietnam, 20 Jan-31 Mar 1968

Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross with Palm  
1 Jan 1967-31 Jul 1971  
1 Aug 1967-31 Aug 1971

### **EMBLEM**

On a light blue disc bordered yellow a lance pale wise to dexter divided vertically white and black garnished red on the dexter side; in sinister a black horse's head cooped above an escutcheon divided per pale white and black charged with a three bladed white propeller detailed black. Attached above the disc a blank white scroll edged yellow. Attached below the disc a white scroll edged yellow and inscribed "Gestalt Non Verba" in black letters. The emblem is symbolic of the Squadron. The blue background alludes to the sky, the primary theater of Air Force operations, and yellow to the sun and excellence of personnel in assigned duties. The lance and shield are traditional military symbols and the propeller on the shield represents the 537th as a flying unit. The horse's head is the emblem of the 1st Calvary Division, whose support is the primary mission of the Squadron. (Approved, 26 Mar 1968)

### **MOTTO**

GESTA NON VERBA-Deeds Not Words

### **NICKNAME**

### **OPERATIONS**

Replacement training, Nov 1943-Apr 1944.

The 537th Troop Carrier Squadron was reactivated under Project "Red Leaf". Prior to reactivation, the 537th was assigned P-47's in WWII and later flew C-46's as an Air Force Reserve unit. As yet it has neither an emblem nor a history though the squadron is presently rectifying this situation. Prior to the 537th assuming operational control of the Caribou, the 17th Aviation Company operated out of An Khe. Those were the days of tents, cold water, rats, and other fond memories the first of us will always remember. Lt Col Charles C. Smith was one of the first to arrive and, after five months transitioning period, assumed command. The squadron immediately moved to Phu Cat, main taining a full schedule during the move.

Phu Cat, the present home of the 537th, was once a Viet Cong stronghold. Under Operations Thayer and Irving, the First Cav, operating primarily out of Hammond, cleared area to help establish the base. The first runway was a 3000 foot dirt strip which operated out of for five months. May '67 saw opening of our 10,000 foot strip and the arrival of two fighter squadrons. This will certainly be the showplace of Vietnam one day.

The 537th is one of six Caribou squadrons assigned to the 483<sup>rd</sup> TCW. The 459th is the other squadron at Phu Cat. The 457th and 458th are at Cam Ranh Bay with 483rd HQ and the 535th and 536th are at Vung Tau. The 483rd is one wing assigned to the 834th Air Division; the primary airlift division in country. The 834th Air Division is assigned to 7th Air Force – both of which are at Tan Son Nhut. The Squadron is divided into A, B, C, and D flights. Flying schedules are rotated throughout the flights on a daily basis. The 537th is the only squadron controlled directly by its using agency, the First Air Cav and operates almost exclusively in the II Corps area of Vietnam.

The primary area of operations in the squadron is within 50 miles of An Khe with daily trips to Phan Thiet and periodic trips to Cam Ranh, Saigon and other areas. In the Primary Area we operate passenger couriers and cargo logistics flights plus a 30 minute med evac standby and a one hour radio relay standby.



C-7A 4190 at Phu Cat AB, South Vietnam, 25 Dec 1970. (USAF photo)

7 May 1968 C-7B 62-4176 Phu Cat A Caribou suddenly lost engine power after take off and crashed while it was attempting to return to land. All the crew survived the incident.

3 October 1968 C-7B 63-9753 Phu Cat

Crew: Capt Wayne Philip Bundy (KIA)

1Lt Ralph Schiavone (KIA)

SSgt Donald Gene Cleaver (KIA)

SSgt James Kenneth Connor (KIA)

9 US Army passengers (KIA)

A C-7 collided with an Army CH-47A Chinook helicopter 66-19041 of the 228th Combat Support Aviation Battalion, 1st Cavalry Division, near Camp Evans. The Caribou took off from Camp Evans and made a climbing right hand turn before reaching the end of the runway. The CH-47, flown by CW2 T E Johnson and WO1 R L Conroy, was approaching Camp Evans from LZ Nancy on a regular shuttle flight with troops and mail and the two aircraft collided at 1,100 feet. One of the Chinook's rotor blades sliced through the Caribou's cockpit and another blade hit the port engine. The Caribou spiraled into the ground and the Chinook's rear rotors separated and struck the helicopter's fuselage causing it to fall to the ground and explode. All four crew and nine passengers were killed in the Caribou and the five crew and six passengers were killed in the Chinook. This was the worst of a number of airspace control incidents during the war. Unfortunately several of these incidents involved the Caribous which the Army had turned over to USAF control in 1967.

26 July 1969 C-7B 62-4186 Phu Cat

1Lt James Fielding Wohrer (KIA)

One of the crew of a Caribou transport aircraft died when it crashed in Phuoc Tuy province, South Vietnam following an engine failure.

11 September 1969 C-7B 62-4187 Phu Cat

Crew: 1Lt Robert Paul Wiesneth (KIA)

1Lt Neil Norman Greinke (KIA)

1Lt Charles Brent Ross (KIA)

SSgt Frederick Wilhelm (KIA)

A Caribou, using the radio call sign Soul 47, was en route to a Special Forces camp near Plei Djereng, 20 miles west of Pleiku, when it was shot down by small arms fire. All four crewmen were killed in the incident.

2 April 1970 C-7A 61-2406

Phu Cat

1Lt Steve Warren Train (KIA)

1Lt Charles E Suprenant (KIA)

MSgt Dale Elling Christensen (KIA)

Two Caribou arrived overhead at Dak Seang in the early morning of the 2nd to drop ammunition to the besieged defenders of the camp. The aircraft approached the camp from the east under the guidance of an FAC who was also directing strikes by fighter aircraft on enemy positions. The

first aircraft dropped successfully but reported ground fire as it made a steep right-hand turn after delivering its load. The second aircraft, flown by 1Lt Train, made a left-hand turn to try to avoid the ground fire but was hit by automatic weapons fire at an altitude of 400 feet. The Caribou flew off to the south, possibly trying to make for Dak To, but it burst into flames and crashed about five miles from Dak Seang, killing the crew.

The 537th Troop Carrier Squadron was formed from the former Army 17th Aviation Company at An Khe on 1 January 1967. The squadron was initially based at Phu Cat, with a Detachment at An Khe.

The operation order stated that each user would furnish mission itineraries to the airlift control center each afternoon for forwarding to the 483d Wing command post. The wing would then assign missions to particular squadrons and publish a daily assignment order. Users could make changes to itineraries at any time, ordinarily through the airlift control center and the wing command post. Certain officers held authority to make diversions in the field using a prescribed code word. A Caribou scheduling officer at the control center was in communication with the Caribou users, and a liaison officer from the 483d Wing coordinated activities with Army transportation officers at Tan Son Nhut. The 483d Wing command post was to monitor missions, communicating with aircrews directly or through airlift control elements, squadron command posts, and mission commanders in the field. Aircrews were to seek opportune loads at control elements or aerial port detachments only when a designated user was unable to provide a load. There were, several exceptions to these arrangements. Most significant was that the 537th Squadron at Phu Cat was designated to support exclusively 1st Cavalry Division. There was also to be direct mission coordination between the division and the squadron.

Under this arrangement the airlift control center did not direct mission scheduling and control. This was in clear contradiction with past Air Force doctrines of centralization. The Air Force, could take satisfaction in retaining at least nominal operational control, and the ability of MACV to change allocations or direct emergency diversions was unquestioned. Further, the Air Force anticipated bringing some of the Caribous into the common service system. Personal visits by Colonel Mascot to each of the user commands allayed misgivings among the ground force commanders.

Although the Caribou squadrons were consolidated at three principal home bases, detachments of ships and crews still remained at six other points to provide a ready response to local needs. Activities at each outlying location were centralized under an onsite mission commander who was a senior officer from the squadron manning the detachment. The alignment of squadrons and detachments was subject to variations in detail over the next two years, but was initially:

As expected, the new units faced varied problems during shakedown. The maintenance crews labored to improve the condition of the force though hampered by heavy flying schedules and the necessity of adapting to the new facilities. The high frequency radio and hotline land communications of the wing command post proved extremely inadequate, allowing only limited monitoring of flight. Foul weather at the coastal bases complicated both maintenance and flying.

Cam Ranh logged over nine inches of rainfall during January, and during one five-day period wind velocity remained steadily above thirty knots.

The 537th Squadron, based at Phu Cat, had a distinctive mission. The full capability was dedicated to the 1st Cavalry Division. Relationships between the cavalry division and the squadron were excellent. The division set itineraries and came to regard the squadron as its own. Activities of the 537th Squadron fell into five categories. First, one or two ships were designated each day for FM radio relay work to link command posts with units in active field operations. The ships carried communications relay equipment operated by Army technicians and ordinarily stayed on ground alert, flying whenever required. The ground alert system was changed late in 1967, and the communications ships were used in airlift tasks subject to thirty-six-hour notice for relay work. A second regular mission task was aeromedical evacuation, both emergency evacuations and scheduled flights to lift patients to the Qui Nhon hospitals. Caribou flight mechanics received basic instruction in aeromedical practices although Air Force aeromedical specialists were sometimes carried. A third task, and the most common, consisted of routine courier and logistics flights linking An Khe with brigade and battalion locations. Fourth, the squadron made daily flights between An Khe and Tan Son Nhut hauling parts from Army aircraft. And fifth were battalion movements, roughly one per week, shifting units to new tactical locations or exchanging two units at opposite points.

Following the shift of the cavalry division to the northern provinces in early 1968, the 537th averaged fourteen round trips daily, linking the northern bases (Evans and Phu Bai) with the logistics sources at An Khe and Qui Nhon. Many such flights were between hard-surface fields capable of receiving C-130s. This wasted the Caribous' unique capabilities and forfeited the superior efficiency of the larger transports. The Air Force, chose to overlook this misuse to avoid any suggestion that the C-130s be incorporated in the dedicated user system. When the cavalry moved to the south in late 1968, the Vung Tau and Cam Ranh squadrons took over the duties of the 537th Squadron.

Individuals from each disbanding squadron were distributed among the remaining units. Aircraft from the 1971 inactivations were ferried to the United States for rework and assignment to the Air Force Reserve. Fifteen aircraft from the 537th Squadron left Cam Ranh Bay on September 14, 1971, each equipped with two extra 480-gallon fuel tanks, and flown by aircrewmembers finishing their overseas tours. Two C-130s island-hopped the central Pacific with the C-7s hauling maintenance personnel and equipment. Twelve more Caribous left Cam Ranh on December 10. One ditched after engine failure east of Hawaii, but its crew was soon rescued by helicopters and a Coast Guard cutter. Aircraft left in Vietnam after the 1972 inactivations were kept for use in training Vietnamese crews and for eventual transfer to new Vietnamese Air Force squadrons. The rapid reduction of the Caribou force had little or no effect on the illicit war effort, since highway travel was now safe in most regions. Colonel Newbold, 483d Wing commander, felt that sortie totals could have been cut back much earlier, since crews increasingly found themselves hauling to points accessible by safe roads. Each squadron, continued mission work full time up to its date of standdown. In February 1972, for example, forty C-7s remained in Vietnam thirty-two assigned to the last two squadrons of the 483d Wing, and eight to the Vietnamese training program at Phu

Cat. Each squadron flew eight missions daily, while Phu Cat provided considerable airlift capability as part of its training program.

New C-130 Squadron in Alaska: The Air Force activated the 537th Airlift Squadron at JB Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska. The active duty unit will partner with the Alaska Air National Guard's 144th AS to operate the Air Guard-owned C-130 transports there under an active association. Members of the 144th AS arrived at Elmendorf-Richardson for beddown just a few months ago, along with their eight C-130s, from nearby Kulis ANG Base under changes resulting from BRAC 2005. The 144th is expected to grow by another four aircraft in the coming months. Lt. Col. Thomas McGee, 537th AS commander, said the association "is a perfect example of Total Force integration, where active duty personnel and Guard personnel work together seamlessly." His unit traces its heritage to the 537th Tactical Airlift Squadron that flew C-7 Caribous out of Phu Cat AB, South Vietnam, before its inactivation in the early 1970s. 2011

Airmen of the newly formed 537th Aircraft Maintenance Unit at JB Elmendorf, Alaska, have begun working with Air National Guardsmen of the 176th Wing in order to maintain the C-130s that will be operating out of the Alaskan base. As part of BRAC 2005, the 176th Wing is relocating from Kulis ANG Base to nearby Elmendorf. Both installations are in the Anchorage area. The Guard wing is bringing the C-130s of its 144th Airlift Squadron with it. Active duty airmen of Elmendorf's 537th Airlift Squadron will help to operate these aircraft, while 537th AMU airmen will help to maintain them. "[O]ur Guard friends here are going to own all the airplanes," said CMSgt. William Holm, 537th AMU chief. He added, "The idea is that with the 537th AS utilizing the Guard resources, we are going to augment the Guard's maintenance capability." 2011

The Air Force earlier this month inactivated the 537th Airlift Squadron at JB Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska. The Active Duty unit had been operating C-130s at the Alaska base since April 2011, together with the Alaska Air National Guard's 144th AS under an active association. The two units primarily supported Army airborne training, according to an Elmendorf release. "Although our time here was short and our manning levels topped out at only four of the intended 12 crews, we feel we have made an impact in Alaska and around the world," said Maj. Ryan Hendrickson, 537th AS director of operations. The inactivation, which took place during a Sept 11 ceremony, was the result of the Air Force's Fiscal 2013 force structure changes, according to the release. 2013

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USAF Unit Histories

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Sources

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The Institute of Heraldry. U.S. Army. Fort Belvoir, VA.

Air Force News. Air Force Public Affairs Agency.

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