

Cam Ranh Bay



Text: Jan van Waarde Photos: Richard W Kamm

Parked in one of the revetments that had been built at Cam Ranh Bay is this F-4C, 64-0713/XN of 559th TFS/12th TFW. The aircraft carries a blue tail-fin while the wing-tanks have blue tips as well. A common practice in Vietnam was the non-standard use of the Fiscal Year presentation in the serial. Nowadays we are used to the fact that the FY is actually carried on the aircraft but this F-4C carries '40' as its FY! If one would present the serial similar to that carried on a C-5, for instance, it would read '40713' and translate into 64-0713. When the Phantoms were camouflaged the serial was abbreviated as shown above.

Recently, I obtained some excellent photographs taken at Cam Ranh Bay AB in South Vietnam, all taken by Robert W Kamm in 1968. Rather than archive them, we decided to write an article about the air base during the war in Vietnam, illustrated by these photographs. Therefore, all photographs that appear in this article are by Richard W Kamm.

Building a Base

The air base at Cam Ranh Bay is located near one of Vietnam's largest port cities in Khanh Hoa province, about 25 miles south of Nha Trang. The bay itself was used by the French as a Naval Base until taken over by the Japanese at the start of World War II; it was destroyed by a US Naval Task Force in 1944 and abandoned.

In 1964, with the increasingly stronger military involvement in the conflict in South Vietnam, the USA was looking for sites that could potentially be developed into bases and Cam Ranh Bay was chosen as the site for a major air base and sea port. The entire base would occupy most of a large peninsula, about 20 miles in length. The air base was to be situated on the upper tip of the peninsula; most of the rest of the base, on the lower part of the peninsula, was used for a large ammunition storage area. Other areas were used for POL storage (Petroleum, Oil and Lubricants), a large Army depot and port facilities for the US Navy.

Construction was carried out by the US Army's Corps of Engineers at a cost of \$100 million. The air base was officially opened on 1 November 1965, but at that time it still basically was a collection of sand dunes and an aluminium matting runway. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara flew in to inspect the base on 29 November. Over the next few years several fighter and transport units were based here; it was also developed into an entry point for large cargo aircraft. Cam Ranh Bay was used as one of three entry points for US military personnel in South Vietnam. Apart from the Air Force, the US Army also maintained a large presence here while the US Navy operated the port facilities. Although many signs on base proclaimed 'Cam Ranh Air Base', the USAF and Navy referred to it in official documents and histories as Cam Ranh Bay AB.

The runways were aligned as 02-20, both were 10,000 ft long. The one on the west was made out of concrete, the east run-

way was made out of aluminium planking. The USAF had its facilities on the western side of the base, while the NAF occupied the eastern side of the base. All F-4Cs were parked in the steel



A view of the C-7 ramp shows three C-7Bs, including this Boe of 539th TAS/483rd TAW, 62-4174/KN. The aircraft carries a yellow fin-tip; the 'last three' of the serial are repeated in the nose in red. The aircraft still carries the old green US Army camo. 62-4174 would be transferred to the South Vietnamese AF in the early 1970s.



F-4C 63-7588/XC of 557th TFS/12th TFW taxiing out at Cam Ranh Bay. The amount of sand is clearly visible in the photograph. Carrying the red colours of 557th TFS, the aircraft is also carrying live Sparrow missiles. In later life, 63-7588 was adopted by 110th TFS Missouri ANG and 199 FIS Hawaii ANG before becoming a training airframe (designated GF-4C) at Sheppard AFB.

revetments; the first of these were erected in 1966. The C-7s and other aircraft were parked on conventional flight lines. Most of the taxiways and flight lines were constructed of aluminium planking as well; these could be rather slippery at times!

The base had over 70 miles of roads, a Navy port able to handle ocean freighters and the largest US Army depot in Vietnam. Along one of the runways was an old French monastery and burial grounds. Located on the base were a number of old French colonial villas.

USAF Operations

12th TFW

A week after the base was officially opened, on 8 November 1965, 12th TFW arrived from MacDill AFB (FL), even though a small advance party of the 12th Combat Support Group had been present in Vietnam since August 1965. The first of the wing's Phantoms had already departed Florida on 31 October but 8 November was the official date of the move. Oddly enough, only 558th TFS remained active during the move; both 557th and 559th TFS were officially inactivated on 8 November and reactivated again in Vietnam a few weeks later. A fourth squadron, 555th TFS, arrived at Cam Ranh Bay on 18 November. This unit came under control of 8th TFW at Ubon RTAFB on 25 January 1966 and was replaced at Cam Ranh Bay by 391st TFS the next day. This unit was originally scheduled to go to Phan Rang AB but construction of that base was completed somewhat later than anticipated and the 391st was diverted to Cam Ranh Bay. Another squadron controlled by 12th TFW was 43rd TFS (which was actually assigned to 15th TFW, also based at MacDill AFB, but attached to the 12th). This squadron had operated from Clark AB for a few months until relocated to Cam Ranh Bay under the control of 12th TFW on 8 November 1965. However, on 1 January 1966 559th TFS was reactivated and took over the assets of the 43rd, which returned (on paper) to MacDill AFB four days later.

Initially many of the wing's F-4Cs were still painted in the early, light grey, ADC colour scheme, but from 1966 camouflage was applied. That same year, the first tail codes were applied to the aircraft as well, following the example set by 366th TFW.

The first combat missions were flown on 19 November 1965.

During their stay at the base, 12th TFW conducted close air support, interdiction and CAP (Combat Air Patrol) missions. The unit kept two aircraft on a 15-minute alert status during daylight hours; these were available for no-notice close air support missions. Two other aircraft were kept in reserve and brought up to 15-minute alert status once the initial two aircraft had been launched. Usually these aircraft were scrambled at least once a day; often these missions were flown in support of US Army special forces which were based in compounds in the countryside, of which Khe Sanh was one of the most well-known. These alert aircraft were also regularly involved in SAR missions, flying cover for the rescue aircraft which were involved in the rescue of downed pilots. During these missions the aircraft worked closely with airborne FAC aircraft like O-1s and O-2s. Main operating area during these missions was over the Ho Chi Minh trail which was the principal supply route for VC forces in South Vietnam.

Up until the fall of 1966 many MIGCAP (MiG Combat Air Patrol) missions over North Vietnam were flown by the F-104Cs of 479th TFW at Udorn RTAFB, but in late 1966 the mission was assumed by 12th TFW. MIGCAP missions were known by their code name 'Silver Dawn'. A racetrack pattern was flown over the Gulf of Tonkin off Haiphong by two pairs of F-4Cs armed with Sidewinders, Sparrows and a 20mm gun pod; one pair was on station while the second refuelled from the accompanying KC-135A. When their presence over North Vietnam was needed by 'Big Eye', the airborne radar stations operating off the coast, a pair of F-4Cs would cross the coastline and proceed to their operations area looking for the MiGs reported in the area. 12th TFW Phantoms would usually fly three CAP missions during daytime, involving three flights of four aircraft. Missions would last up to 4½ hours but sometimes their relief was diverted elsewhere due to a contingency. The aircraft would then have to stay airborne for two shifts and very occasionally a third shift was flown, which kept the crews airborne for over twelve hours! Crews quickly adapted and learned that it was a wise idea to bring food and drinks during these missions. Unfortunately, although MiGs were encountered, the unit was never able to actually shoot one down; most F-4C kills in Vietnam were made by 8th TFW and 366th TFW aircraft.



A genuine MiG-killer taxiing out for a CAS mission, armed with bombs on the wing stations. No missiles were carried for self-defence on this mission. The aircraft in question is 64-0699/XT of 391st TFS/12th TFW and carries yellow markings on the tail and the fuel tanks. As can be seen the taxiway is made of aluminium planking. 64-0699 would later serve with 58th TFW at Luke AFB and the Texas and Oregon ANG's before ending up in AMARC in 1989. The MiG-kill was scored on 23 April 1966 when Capt Robert E. Blake and 1Lt S.W. George, both with 555th TFS/8th TFW (from Ubon RTAFB), shot down a MiG-17, using a Sidewinder missile. At that time, this was only the third USAF kill in Vietnam.



A photo-page illustrating the various interesting visiting aircraft at Cam Ranh Bay starts with RF-4C 66-0420/OZ of 14th TRS/432nd TRW from Udorn RTAFB. That squadron arrived in Southeast Asia in late October 1967 and would stay until 1975. 66-0420 was shot down over North Vietnam on 13 November 1970, still with the 14th. Sadly, both crewmembers were killed.



F-100 Super Sabres mainly operated over South Vietnam. 531st TFS/3rd TFW was based at Bien Hoa AB until 1970. F-100D 56-3279/CP is depicted in the photograph above. No tail colour is carried, but the tips of the fuel tank and the sash under the windscreen are in red. 56-3279 later served with the Indiana ANG before being shot down as a QF-100D on 20 February 1992.



As quoted in the text, several C-130 units rotated in and out of Cam Ranh Bay on a TDY-basis. The base was capable of handling the largest cargo aircraft like the C-5; above is C-130A 56-0470/YJ of 35th TAS/374th TAW from Naha AB, Okinawa, which was a US protectorate until 1972. On the left a C-124 Globemaster is visible in the photograph. 56-0470 was later assigned to a variety of ANG units until ending up at AMARC in 1987.



A few additional examples of the Phantoms at Cam Ranh Bay. Above is F-4C 64-0804/XC of 557th TFS/12th TFW parked in the squadron's area. The aircraft survived the war and later served with 93rd TFS AFRES and the Oregon ANG before being retired to AMARC in 1987. On the right is F-4C 63-7708/XN of 559th TFS/12th TFW being prepared for another mission. It carries the name 'Half Fast' on the nose. The aircraft carries the unit's blue squadron markings. This particular aircraft was shot down on 2 October 1969 when it was hit by small arms fire during an attack run on a target in South Vietnam and exploded. The pilot was killed, the WSO survived.



Another mission flown by 12th TFW Phantoms was that of EB-66 escort. These aircraft, used for electronic warfare, usually flew missions over Route Package Six in the vicinity of Hanoi, in the northern part of North Vietnam, and these were escorted by 12th TFW F-4Cs. North Vietnamese MiGs often targeted these aircraft, making a single high-speed pass before fleeing to the buffer zone between China and North Vietnam which the Phantoms were not allowed to enter.

On 2 May 1967 one of the unit's F-4Cs, 64-0689 of 558th TFS, caught fire during take-off when the engine ingested fuel. The crew quickly exited the aircraft following a high-speed abort but the aircraft was destroyed in the ensuing fire, six bombs on the aircraft detonated and the runway was closed for 24 hours. On 4 July 1968 F-4C 63-7496 of 391st TFS was one of a flight of F-4Cs scrambled for Cam Ranh Bay to support US ground forces that were engaged in a heated battle about 10 miles north of the base. The aircraft, flown by 1Lt J. B. Jaeger and

Maj D. A. Hamilton, made eight passes over the target but on the ninth pass the port engine was hit by ground fire causing the crew to eject. A US Army helicopter flying nearby recovered the crew in no time. Not all crewmembers were that lucky as a number were killed or captured. These examples show that flying Phantoms in combat was a dangerous business. Between the start of operations in November 1965 and February 1970, a total of 64 F-4Cs was lost, 47 of which during combat operations. Obviously, the list is too long to list details but the table at the bottom of the page reveals some details.

On 23 January 1968 the USS Pueblo, a small US intelligence-gathering vessel operating off the coast of North Korea, was seized by the North Koreans and its 82 surviving crewmembers were held capture by North Korea for the next eleven months. The US responded by reinforcing its forces in Korea and 558th TFS was deployed to Kunsan AB in two periods between 4 February 1968 and 22 July 1968. Upon arrival in Korea it was

12th TFW losses		Squadron				Cause		Location		
Year	Yearly total	391	557	558	559	AAA	Operat.	SVN	NVN	Laos
1965	2		2			2		2		
1966	15	1	5	3	6	9	6	8	5	2
1967	21	3	6	7	5	17	4	12	6	3
1968	10	4	2	1	3	6	4	7	1	2
1969	15		4	6	5	12	3	12		3
1970	1		1			1				1
Totals	64	8	20	17	19	47	17	41	12	11

the midst of winter and most of the crews, wearing summer fatigues only, though it was quite an unpleasant difference from hot and humid South Vietnam! The squadron's F-4Cs were placed on alert status and were ready to strike the north. On 22 July 1968 391st TFS changed places with the 558th and remained based in Korea.

By the end of 1968, the wing had already flown nearly 70,000 combat missions over both North and South Vietnam.

In March 1970 the USA was busy withdrawing large numbers of troops and units from Vietnam, in accordance with the 'Vietnamization' process which gave more responsibilities (and equipment like C-7s, F-5s and A-37s) to South Vietnamese forces. 12th TFW operations at Cam Ranh Bay were suspended and the F-4Cs were dispersed to other units or flown back stateside. All three active squadrons were inactivated on 31 March 1970. On the latter date 37th TFW at Phu Cat AB was redesignated 12th TFW. Subordinate units were 389th TFS and 480th TFS, both flying F-4Ds. The wing at Phu Cat was finally inactivated in November 1971. In 1972 the unit was reactivated as 12th FTW, a training unit at Randolph AFB (TX), replacing 3510th PTW at the base.

Base facilities

Recreational facilities at the base were excellent, military personnel eligible for some R&R took advantage of this. The beaches were amongst the best in Southeast Asia. The Navy's officer's club was located at the crescent-shaped South Beach. The USAF had Baker Beach, at which monthly parties and barbecues were organized by the based squadrons. This was also the place to play beach volleyball and do some snorkelling; the fish were colourful and the lobsters huge. A snack bar was provided at the beach for drinks and food. Elsewhere on the base amenities like tennis courts and swimming pools were available.

The base was literally built on sand, as can be seen in the background of many pictures of the base. Wooden sidewalks were laid out between the tents to make walking a little easier. Everybody just loved the sand (not!), it would get into everything no



F-4C 63-7528/XC of 557th TFS/12th TFW being preflighted for another missions by its crew and groundcrew. Each wing station totes 3 1000 lb 'dumb' bombs. The crewmember on the right is putting the final touches to his G-suit while the one below the aircraft is checking the gun-pod.

matter how tightly you would seal it... The base was also known as the 'sand capital of the world'!

Initially, housing facilities consisted of a large tent city but from 1966 these were replaced by Quonset huts. With all the sand blowing around, the base was not one of the best places to live at! Later, by 1967, the facilities became quite excellent. Apart from a few large wooden two-storey dorms a large number of neat single-storey buildings were erected to house aircrew and supporting personnel. These were all well-ventilated to combat the humid warmth. Although many chairs and other furniture were made from locally obtained wood, some people managed to get their hands on some real furniture.

The base also had one of the largest hospitals in the area; the nurses were housed in their own housing area, circled by two wire fences and with three armed guards on patrol. One presumes this was to keep people out of the enclosure as the ratio of men to women was way off!

A large number of Vietnamese personnel was employed by the



F-4C 63-7496/XD of 558th TFS/12th TFW taxiing to the runway Cam Ranh Bay. A few months later, on 4 July 1968, the aircraft was attacking enemy positions about 10 miles north of the base when it was hit by ground fire in the port engine during the ninth pass (!) over the target. Damage was lethal and the crew ejected immediately and was picked up by a US Army helicopter.



Another page with visitors at Cam Ranh Bay: sharing a revetment were F-100D 55-2925/HS of 308th TFS/31st TFW from Tuy Hoa AB and A-37A 67-14505/CK of 604th ACS/14th ACW. This Dragonfly was the third production aircraft and was based at Bien Hoa AB. The diminutive A-37As were based in Vietnam as an operational evaluation force under project 'Combat Dragon'. Experience gained with the type led to an improved version of the aircraft, the A-37B.



Looking somewhat worse for wear is this F-4C, 63-7679/CV of 480th TFS/366th TFW from Da Nang AB. The 366th were the inventors of the tail codes used by the USAF since 1966 but had a unique way of coding their aircraft. Each aircraft used a unique code, with the first letter denoting the squadron, with 'C' being 480th TFS. The second letter was unique to the aircraft, other examples being 63-7555/CU, 63-7584/CC and 63-7666/CP. The idea behind these codes was that while flying in formation, one would instantly know who was his wingman, with the second letter often coinciding with the pilot's name or callsign.



F-102s were on alert duties in South Vietnam between 1964 and September 1968. 509th FIS, based at Clark AB in the Philippines, maintained an alert detachment at Bien Hoa AB until the latter date. The squadron's F-102s were unique due to the fact that they were camouflaged and carried tail codes. Here F-102A 55-3369/PK taxis out for a mission.

USAF at Cam Ranh Bay. These included cleaning ladies who looked after the base's housing. The base hospital also employed a number of Vietnamese. The pontoon bridge at My Ca gave access between the base and the mainland; towns like Cam Ranh and Mi Kai provided numerous hangouts for off-duty personnel.

483rd TAW

Following a long-lasting dispute between the USAF and US Army over who was allowed to control the large fixed-wing CV-2B Caribou transports operated by the US Army, the Army drew the short straw and all CV-2Bs had to be transferred to the USAF who redesignated them C-7B. On 12 October 1966 483rd TCW was activated at Cam Ranh Bay to control these aircraft; the official handover was planned for 1 January 1967. The wing was the sole operator of the Caribou (affectionally nicknamed the 'Boo') in South Vietnam and had six squadrons assigned; only two of these, 457th and 458th TAS, were actually based at Cam Ranh Bay. The other four were based at Phu Cat AB (459th and 537th TAS) and at Vung Tau AB (535th and 536th TAS). Additionally, several detachments were operated throughout South Vietnam (at An Khe, Can Tho, Da Nang, Nha Trang and Pleiku) and Thailand (Bangkok). Later in 1967, on 1 August, the wing was redesignated 483rd TAW.

On 1 January 1967 USAF C-7B operations at Cam Ranh Bay began; the aircraft's mission was to provide cargo and logistical support to US Army and allied ground forces throughout South Vietnam. The mission was important; the Caribous flew scheduled and emergency airlift missions to remote airstrips and battle grounds that were out of bounds to aircraft like the C-130. Amongst these were the special forces camps in the central Vietnamese highlands. Places that were inaccessible even for C-7s could find themselves on the receiving end of an airdrop. As a rule of thumb, the C-7 could land at 1,000 ft airstrips, while the C-123 needed 2,000 ft and the C-130 3,000 ft.

In August 1968 the Special Forces camps at Duc Lap, Ha Thanh and Tonle Cham came under attack by VC forces and the C-7 units were called upon to deliver emergency supplies to these bases. The aircraft carried out pinpoint night airdrops of ammunition and medical supplies in 75-foot-square drop zones in these camps. The Caribous came in at tree-top level and popped up to 300 feet at the last moment for the drop. In June 1969 Cam Ranh Bay's C-7s came into action during the siege of the Special Forces camp at Ben Het. The aircraft dropped over 200 tons of ammunition, POL, food, water and medical supplies on a 100 x 200-foot drop zone. They made run-ins at twenty-second intervals while the enemy fire was being sup-

pressed by fighter aircraft flying cover over the base.

Another siege that involved the C-7s was that of Dak Seang, which was broken up in April 1970. The victory was achieved with the help of 400 tons of supplies which were dropped over the base, a 500-foot square special forces camp, during 100 sorties that were flown over a ten-day period. Initially the same tactics as with the siege of Ben Het were attempted but three aircraft were lost during the first week after which they switched to night drops during which the drop zone was marked by signal flares. The first three airdrops contained much-needed medical supplies; the camp's dispensary had taken a direct hit. The next day two more airdrops were attempted; one of the aircraft was shot down while the other sustained major damage. Undaunted, the C-7 crews continued flying missions to the camp and over the next few days 400 tons of supplies were airdropped.

Although being shot at was an almost daily routine for the 'Boo' crews, both Cam Ranh Bay-based squadrons, 457th and 458th TAS lost just five aircraft during operations, all of these in South Vietnam, of which three were under operational circumstances, like 63-9761 that hit a tree while performing an airdrop over Hensel AAF and crashed nearby on 25 July 1968. Unfortunately, two of the four crewmembers did not survive the incident.

As with the other two resupply missions related above, C-130s were impractical as these were too cumbersome and carried too much payload for these small camps to be offloaded quickly. The C-7 was a logical alternative, being small, agile and of simple construction. Additionally, they were able to take heavy ground fire and continue flying. The type's STOL capabilities were vital to many operations and often used during operations from small airstrips.

With the demise of 12th TFW, 483rd TAW became the host unit at Cam Ranh Bay on 31 March 1970. In July 1970 the USAF left Vung Tau AB and the two 483rd TAW C-7B squadrons based there, 535th and 536th TAS, moved over to Cam Ranh Bay during the summer.

On 31 May 1972, when Caribou operations came to an end and many of the aircraft were transferred to the South Vietnamese AF it turned out that the aircraft had in some way participated in nearly every important operation in South Vietnam in the previous six years; they truly had been one of the most important aircraft in the country. During the wing's existence they had transported 4.7 million passengers.

38th ARRS/39th ARRS/20th SOS

There were several smaller units based at Cam Ranh Bay, as



Having just been repainted (compare this scheme with that on the opening page of this article) was this C-7A, 60-5431. Although assigned to 483rd TCW, the aircraft did not carry any unit markings as yet, unlike the Boos in the background - note the different tail codes. 60-5431 was later transferred to the South Vietnamese AF.



One of the oddest looking helicopters ever built was the Kaman Huskie with its twin rotorheads. Originally built for the USMC as an observation helicopter, the type was also adopted by the USAF as a base rescue helicopter and detachments of 38th ARRS were based at every major airbase in Southeast Asia. Det.8 was at Cam Ranh Bay and the photograph shows HH-43B 60-0253 standing alert on the unit's platform, clearly showing the odd lines of the type.

related below.

On 18 January 1966 38th ARRS Detachment 8 was activated at Cam Ranh Bay, which used two HH-43B Huskies for base SAR duties. They were kept on alert at all times and were scrambled often when aircraft with battle damage returned to the base for an emergency landing. The unit was inactivated again on 15 September 1970.

One of the other small tenants at Cam Ranh Bay was 39th ARRS, which moved in here from Tuy Hoa AB in September 1970. At the time the squadron used eleven HC-130Ps which were mainly used as Airborne Command and Control Centres (ABCCCs) or to refuel helicopters during rescue missions. One aircraft was kept airborne at all times, with two extra HC-130Ps being placed on ground alert in the event of a contingency. The unit moved to Korat RTAFB in Thailand in March 1972, where

the unit was inactivated the next month.

Another small unit at the base was 20th SOS, the 'Green Hornets'. Like 39th ARRS, the unit and its UH-1Ps arrived from Tuy Hoa AB, on 25 September 1970. At that time the squadron was still assigned to 14th SOW, but was placed under the control of the 483rd TAW on 1 September 1971 and it was the only USAF Special Operations unit flying Hueys in Vietnam. The unit was inactivated on 1 April 1972.

The final unit based here was Det.2 of 6091st Reconnaissance Squadron. 6091st RS was based at Yokota AB and used RC-130Bs as well as various models of the B-57. It is unknown which types were (temporarily) based here with the Det.

Others

Other airlift assets operating from the base were large numbers of C-130s. No C-130s were permanently based here, but units would come over for periods of TDY at Cam Ranh Bay. Amongst these were C-130Bs from the 463rd TAW at Clark AB (Philippines), which operated Detachment.1 from here. Aircraft from Clark were based here at any given time. Other C-130 units spending periods of TDY here included 314th TAW from Ching Chuan Kang AB in Taiwan and 374th TAW from Naha AB, Okinawa. Initially the C-130 crews shared buildings with the C-7 outfit, but later they were given their own C-130 crew quarters and operations buildings, known as 'Herky Hill'.

Cam Ranh Bay quickly became a large strategic cargo hub for the USA forces in Vietnam. Initially a steady stream of C-141As would fly into



One of the unsung aircraft types in USAF history is the C-133 Cargomaster, which was replaced by the C-5 Galaxy in the early 1970s. The aircraft made regular cargo flights to Vietnam across the Pacific. C-133B 59-0529 of 60 MAW above is seen landing at CRB.

the base, later augmented by the giant C-5A Galaxy. The very first C-5 mission to Vietnam was actually flown to Cam Ranh Bay, arriving at the base on 5 June 1970. Other types of aircraft noted at the base over the years were C-97s, C-124s, C-133s and various South Vietnamese military aircraft like C-119s. Also, civilian airliners operating on MATS contracts were a familiar sight at the base. Illustrating the importance of the base as a cargo transit base was the fact that in April 1971 alone 80,522 passengers passed through here, as well as 10,425 tons of cargo and 712 tons of mail.

US ARMY Operations

At Cam Ranh Bay, the US Army operated the largest supply depot in the country. A few support helicopters and U-6s were based here and the depot attracted some visitors like CH-47s but few Army aviation units were actually based here. Many Army aviation units arrived in Vietnam, by ship, in Cam Ranh Bay port though and were processed here before continuing to their eventual destination airfields.

In the days before Christmas 1966 the US Army gathered its CV-2B Caribous at Cam Ranh Bay and these were 'owned' by 135th AvCo. The aircraft were transferred to the USAF as C-7As on 1 January 1967 and the 135th was deactivated that same day.

The 1st Radio Research Company (Aviation), part of the US Army Security Agency (USASA), arrived at Cam Ranh Bay on 30 June 1967 and they used the unique Lockheed RP-2E Neptune (later redesignated AP-2E), six of which were converted to this standard in a project with code name 'Crazy Cat'. Three of these were active jammer aircraft while the others were passive radio research aircraft; they carried out classified intelligence gathering missions with a crew of fifteen, looking for VC transmissions. The missions lasted between fourteen and seventeen hours and usually took them over the DMZ and southern Laos. These Neptunes shared the ramp and barracks with VAH-21 over at the Naval Air Facility; at the time they were the largest aircraft operated by the US Army. According to legend, the actual designation of the unit was 1st Army Security Agency Company and the 1st RRCO(A) designation was just a cover-up. They were finally withdrawn in April 1972 and never suffered any losses, having flown over 40,000 hours in combat.

The large hospital on base had two US Army units assigned to it between 1966 and 1971, 418th MedCo and 568th MedCo. A



Illustrating the US Army's presence at the base are this unidentified AH-1G on a helipad in front of the old French monastery at Cam Ranh Bay and below is CH-47A 65-7971 receiving some cargo.

few UH-1Ds were used as air ambulances.

Most of the other US Army aviation units in the area actually operated out of Dong Ba Thin, just a few miles from the airbase, across the bay on the mainland. The 10th Combat Aviation Battalion was based here between October 1965 and January 1972 and over the years it had a variety of Aviation Companies assigned to it which flew aircraft like the CH-47A, CH-47B, UH-1B, UH-1C, UH-1D, UH-1H, UH-1M and the AH-1G.

US NAVY Operations

Immediately after the base was opened in 1965 the US Navy was present with the Naval Support Agency, Saigon, Detach-



One of the types forever associated with the war in Vietnam was the Republic F-105 Thunderchief. Although they took a terrible beating, the Chiefs were loved by the pilots because of their ruggedness. Parked in one of Cam Ranh Bay's revetments is F-105D 61-0196/RM of 354th TFS/355th TFW, a unit based at Takhli RTAFB in Thailand. 61-0196 did not survive the war; it was lost in an operational accident over Thailand on 28 November 1969, when it collided with F-105D 60-0435 during aerial refuelling in heavy turbulence. Fortunately, both pilots managed to eject safely.



C-47s were still very much in use in Vietnam; the first gunships were converted 'Gooney Birds'. Seen here on the C-7 platform (note the aluminium planking) is C-47D 44-76578. The aircraft's unit remains unknown, but it does carry a small 'Snoopy' cartoon figure beneath the cockpit window.



Creating its own little sand storm while taxiing to the ramp is C-123K 55-4561/WM of 310th ACS/315th ACW, based at Phan Rang AB. In 1972, the aircraft was transferred to the South Vietnamese AF but ended up with the South Korean AF.



One of the units operating from Cam Ranh Bay on a TDY basis was 776th TAS/314th TAW, usually based at Ching Chuan Kang AB in Taiwan. The photograph depicts C-130E 63-7881/DL with the characteristic sand dunes in the background on the right.



FACs (Forward Air Controllers) played an important part during the conflict in Vietnam, marking targets for F-100s and F-4s, for example. The earliest type used was the O-1 Birddog. O-1E 56-2556 is shown on the right, with engine running. Although assigned to 20th TASS (based at Da Nang AB), it carries the badge of the US Army's 101st Airborne Division on the tail fin. This particular O-1 was shot down over Hue in South Vietnam on 17 September 1968 after its engine had been hit by ground fire. It crashlanded and the pilot was rescued. Also used were the O-2A and OV-10A Bronco (above), a type especially developed for the FAC role. The first OV-10As arrived in Vietnam in August 1968 and were assigned to 19th TASS. Brand-



new example 67-14659 is shown on the ramp at Cam Ranh Bay. By 7 April 1973 it had been reassigned to 23th TASS when it was shot down over Cambodia while actually directing fighters during an air strike. It caught fire and crashed, unfortunately killing the pilot.

ment Cam Ranh Bay. Initially they relied on the USAF and Army for housing and support of the sailors, but in 1966 the Navy built several installations on the base which enabled them to cater for themselves, but catering and housing was provided on the APL-55, an unnamed barracks vessel that was anchored in the harbour.

In August 1965 the *USS Pine Island* (AV-12) arrived in the bay; this ship acted as a support 'base' for SP-5B Marlin seaplanes, providing food, supplies and maintenance for the flying boats. VP-50 Marlins started operating from the bay in support of 'Operation Market Time', the surveillance and searching of coastal traffic off Vietnam in an effort to slow down the flow of weapons from North Vietnam to the south. The aircraft made eight to nine-hour long patrols over the area. Take-offs were made from a designated water runway in the bay; the aircraft usually used JATO bottles to improve their take-off performance.

After several years of seaplane operations from the Bay, the Navy established a Naval Air Facility at Cam Ranh Bay AB on 1 April 1967. The Next day a detachment of SP-2Hs of VP-42 arrived from NS Sangley Point in the Philippines which started flying coastal patrols off South Vietnam in support of 'Market Time', an important operation that would continue over the next few years and for which Cam Ranh Bay became the main base. These missions were not without risks and occasionally the aircraft would draw ground fire but the Neptunes themselves were able to attack and sink several vessels. Initially, SP-2Hs were continuously present at the facility, later superseded by the P-3A and P-3B. Usually, the squadrons involved were

actually deployed elsewhere, like Sangley Point or NAF Naha, but maintained a small, usually permanent, detachment at Cam Ranh Bay. In December 1971 the final Orions departed the NAF. For deployment details have a look at the table on the next page which lists all 'Market Time' deployments.

The Base Flight used the C-117D and UC-45J as support aircraft. After the establishment of the NAF the naval facilities at the air base were rigorously expanded. This included a major cargo port, a major repair facility for ships, a Naval communications facility and a support base for the coastal patrol boat forces, for landing ships and destroyers, located on the southern tip of the peninsula.

On 14 January 1968 the first of four AP-2H Neptunes had arrived at Cam Ranh Bay in support of Project TRIM (Trails Roads Interdiction Multisensor). These Neptunes, carrying a unique three-tone grey camouflage, used an enhanced sensor and electronic surveillance package (like SLAR and FLIR) and additional offensive weapons systems like a grenade launcher and a SUU-11 minigun pod. The first combat mission with these aircraft was flown on 1 March 1968. VAH-21 was established at NAS Sangley Point on the Philippines on 1 September 1968. On the same date, the Project TRIM detachment at Cam Ranh Bay became a Detachment of VAH-21. The squadron was tasked with a night interdiction mission and most missions were flown over the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Cambodia's 'Parrot Beak' regions that bordered South Vietnam and against road and river traffic in the Mekong Delta. In December 1968 the unit also started using an SP-2H for training purposes; this aircraft was

also used for logistics flights between South Vietnam and the unit's home base in the Philippines. On 16 June 1969 the unit was disestablished again and the AP-2Hs were flown to Davis Monthan AFB for storage. During the unit's short existence they had flown over 200 night combat sorties.

Between January and April 1972 the Naval Air Facility and other facilities were handed over to the South Vietnamese Navy.

The End

In 1970 US military forces were slowly withdrawn from South Vietnam, with many assets being turned over to the South Vietnamese. The USA did not need Cam Ranh Bay AB any more and the base was handed over to South Vietnam on 30 March 1971. The C-7Bs continued to operate from the base for a short period after that but on 31 May 1972 483rd TAW was inactivated.

Post-War

Following the departure of US forces from Vietnam in 1973, the base was initially used by the South Vietnamese AF as a storage facility for their obsolescent A-1s and T-28s. At that time they still operated a large number of A-37s and F-5s.

Early in 1975 North Vietnam started its final offensive against the south. By 30 March the city of Da Nang was the scene of heavy fighting; people used anything afloat to escape from the city. Initially Cam Ranh Bay, about 400 miles to the south, was chosen as a safe haven for the refugees but the North Vietnamese quickly caught up with the flow of refugees and after the South Vietnamese Army pulled out from the base it was taken over by North Vietnamese forces on 3 April.

Following the unification of Vietnam Cam Ranh Bay became an important support base for Soviet fleet operations and in 1979 the Soviets signed an agreement for a 25-year lease of the base which quickly became the largest Soviet naval base outside the Soviet Union. In the 1980s Soviet aircraft like MiG-23 fighters, Tu-95 Bears

Operation unit	Market type	Time code	detachments at Cam Ranh Bay date in	date out	main base
VP-50 Det	SP-5B	SG	26aug65	14mar66	NS Sangley Point
VP-48 Det	SP-5B	SF	01oct65	04sep66	
VP-50 Det	SP-5B	SG	23aug66	06feb67	
VP-40 Det	SP-5B	QE	01mar67	30apr67	
VP-42 Det	SP-2H	RB	02apr67	01dec67	NS Sangley Point
VP-1 Det	SP-2H	YB	15may67	12nov67	NS Sangley Point
VP-17 Det	SP-2H	ZE	19nov67	29apr68	NS Sangley Point
VP-2 Det	SP-2H	YC	01feb68	30mar68	NS Sangley Point
VP-6 Det	P-3A	PC	13may68	07jun68	NAF Naha
VP-19 Det	P-3B	PE	15jun68	15jun68	MCAS Iwakuni
VP-42 Det	SP-2H	RB	mar68	sep68	NS Sangley Point (note)
VP-50 Det	P-3A	SG	01may68	01nov68	NS Sangley Point
VP-22 Det	P-3A	QA	jul68	dec68	NAF Naha (note)
VP-4 Det	P-3A	YD	aug68	jan69	MCAS Iwakuni (note)
VP-1 Det	SP-2H	YB	15aug68	25feb69	NS Sangley Point
VP-47 Det	P-3B	RD	01nov68	31mar69	NS Sangley Point
VP-28 Det	P-3A	QC	17jan69	18jul69	NAF Naha
VP-40 Det	P-3B	QE	feb69	aug69	MCAS Iwakuni
VP-9 Det	P-3B	PD	01apr69	01oct69	NS Sangley Point
VP-45 Det	P-3A	LN	18apr69	28apr69	NS Sangley Point
VP-50 Det	P-3A	SG	01aug69	15jan70	NAF Naha
VP-17 Det	P-3A	ZE	09aug69	11sep69	MCAS Iwakuni
VP-46 Det	P-3B	RC	02oct69	31mar69	NS Sangley Point
VP-47 Det	P-3B	RD	jan70	jul70	NAF Naha (note)
VP-1 Det	P-3B	YB	feb70	jul70	MCAS Iwakuni (note)
VP-48 Det	P-3B	SF	01apr70	30sep70	NS Sangley Point
VP-50 Det	P-3A	SG	30sep70	31mar70	NS Sangley Point
VP-19 Det	P-3B	PE	10oct70	24oct70	MCAS Iwakuni
VP-22 Det	P-3A	QA	25jan71	02feb71	NAF Naha
VP-4 Det	P-3B	YD	feb71	jul71	MCAS Iwakuni (note)
VP-1 Det	P-3B	YB	01apr71	01oct71	NS Sangley Point
VP-6 Det	P-3A	PC	21sep71	02dec71	NAS Cubi Point

The base given behind the TDY squadrons is their main operating base during that deployment. The deployment dates are the official dates quoted by US Navy records. In 1965, VP-50 and VP-48 operated from the seaplane tender USS Pine Island (AV-12) which was berthed in Cam Ranh Bay. The ship was replaced by the USS Salisbury Sound (AV-13) on 12 February 1966. For the 1966/1967 deployments, VP-50 and VP-40 operated from the tender USS Currituck (AV-7). During their 1968 deployments, VP-42, VP-22 and VP-4 did not have a permanent detachment at Cam Ranh Bay but came here for short periods at a time. The same goes for the 1970/1971 deployments of VP-47, VP-1 and VP-4.

and Beriev Be-12s were based here. By 1993, however, the Soviet combat forces had departed and only a signals intelligence facility remained. By the time the agreement neared its end the Vietnamese wanted to renew but asked for \$200 million in annual rent which the Soviets refused. The Soviets officially



A wonderfully atmospheric shot of some ramp action at Cam Ranh Bay. It shows C-123K Provider 54-0696/WE of 19th ACS/315th ACW from Tan Son Nhut AB. It carries the name 'Jenny' on the nose. These 'Air Commando' Providers supported US Special Forces, supplying priority cargo to their outposts dotted around the country. Note the Vietnamese C-119 on the left!



Parked in front of the maintenance shed on the base is this F-4C, 63-7605/XN of 559th TFS/12th TFW. Although the proper blue colour is carried on the tips of the fuel tanks, the fin-tip colour of this aircraft is black. The aircraft survived the war and served in Europe with 81st TFW at RAF Bentwaters and 401st TFW at Torrejon AB in Spain before being passed on to the Missouri and Arkansas ANGs. It was finally placed in storage at AMARC in 1988.

BASED UNITS: squadron	type	code	date in	date out	remarks
USAF					
12th TFW			08nov65	31mar70	
-	43rd TFS	F-4C	08nov65	04jan66	TDY from 15th TFW
-	391st TFS	F-4C	26jan66	23jun66	TDY from 366th TFW
-			23jun66	22jul68	assigned to 12th TFW
-	555th TFS	F-4C	18nov66	25jan66	
-	557th TFS	F-4C	01dec65	31mar70	
-	558th TFS	F-4C	08nov65	31mar70	
-	559th TFS	F-4C	01jan66	31mar70	
14th SOW	20th SOS	UH-1P	25sep70	01sep71	
38th ARRS	Det.8	HH-43B	18jan66	15sep70	
39th ARRS		HC-130P	16sep70	mar72	
463rd TAW	Det.1	C-130	unknown		rotational squadrons
483rd TCW			12oct66	01aug67	
483rd TAW			01aug67	31may72	
-	20th SOS	UH-1P	01sep71	01apr72	
-	457th TAS	C-7B	KA	01jan67	30apr72
-	458th TAS	C-7B	KC	01jan67	01mar72
-	535th TAS	C-7B	KH	summer1970	24jan72
-	536th TAS	C-7B	KL	summer1970	15oct71
6091st RS	Det.2	?	unknown		
558th TFS was temporarily assigned to 4th TFW 4 February 1968 and 10 March 1968, and again between 26 March 1968 and 22 July 1968. During those periods the squadron deployed to Kunsan AB in South Korea in an effort to reinforce US forces in Korea during the Pueblo crisis, which emerged following the North Korean seizure of a US 'spy ship'.					
US Army					
1st RRCo(Avn)		RP-2E	30jun67	apr72	
134th AvCo		CV-2B	dec66	01jan67	
418th MedCo(AA)		UH-1D	jun66	apr71	
568th MedCo(AA)		UH-1D	jan66	mar71	
US Navy					
VAH-21		AP-2H	SL	01sep68	16jun69
Project TRIM		AP-2H		14jan68	01sep68

departed on 2 May 2002 and up to this day the facility has remained largely dormant even though the airfield has been in use as a civilian airport since 2004.

CREDITS:

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