

The Film of War

A1C Darryl Winters was one of the first and most heroic Air Force combat photographers in Vietnam.

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IT WAS inevitable that the airplane and the camera would be teamed to reach that long-elusive goal of military commanders—rapid, detailed information on distant enemy forces. Even before USAF's earliest progenitor, the Aeronautical Division of the US Signal Corps, was created in 1907, a young Signal Corps officer, Capt. Billy Mitchell, was experimenting with kite-borne cameras.

As aeronautical and photographic technology advanced, the uses of aerial photography expanded beyond reconnaissance to include documentation of combat operations for tactical evaluation and training purposes. That function became the mission of Military Airlift Command's Aerospace Audiovisual Service (AAVS). Early in the Vietnam War, AAVS "backseat" motion picture photographers were sent to Southeast Asia to cover air operations. Before the war ended, twelve AAVS combat photographers had lost their lives in line of duty.

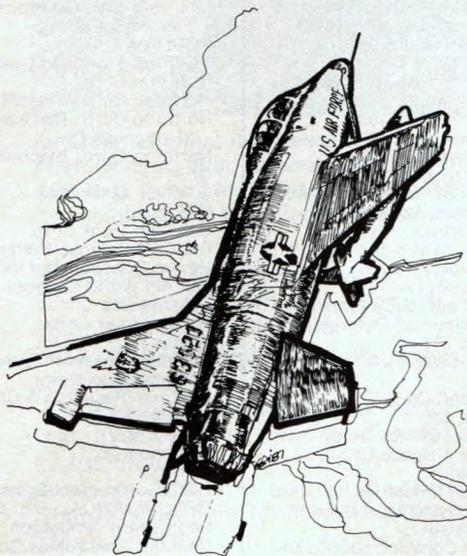
One of the early backseaters was A1C Darryl G. Winters, who was assigned to the 600th Photographic Squadron at Tan Son Nhut AB in January 1965. For the next eighteen months, Winters served with the squadron's detachment at Bien Hoa. At that time, there were fewer than a dozen Air Force combat photographers in Vietnam.

Darryl Winters flew his first combat mission four days after he reported for duty. According to his detachment commander, 1st Lt. Douglas Burrows, Winters was "a top-notch motion picture man" who

"would rather fly than eat." At the end of his twelve-month tour of duty, Winters had flown through enough enemy ground fire and seen enough aircraft shot down to have a firm understanding of the hazards of tactical operations. Nevertheless, he asked to extend for an additional twelve months.

As his eighteenth month in Vietnam approached, Winters had flown more than 300 missions—nine over North Vietnam—most of them in F-100Fs, Winters's favorite aircraft. He had earned a reputation as a superb photographer and as a man who would volunteer for any dangerous mission.

Winters also covered air strikes from the ground, accompanying Army units on search-and-destroy forays. And in May 1965, when a series of explosions on the ramp at Bien Hoa destroyed thirteen aircraft and killed thirty Americans, Winters was one of three AAVS cameramen who went into the blazing area to film the disaster. For that action, he was awarded the Bronze Star. Here was a young man with a sense of mission and a belief in the importance of his work.



Darryl Winters was the first AAVS combat photographer to lose his life in Vietnam.

By July 19, 1966, Airman Winters had earned eleven Oak Leaf clusters to his Air Medal and had taken 30,000 feet of combat film that was used for tactical and intelligence evaluation of air strikes. Because of the quality of his photography, much of the footage was cleared for use by the news media. On that day, the twenty-seven-year-old Winters volunteered to film a strafing attack on a Viet Cong position in a well-defended area a few miles west of Saigon. It was his 217th mission in the backseat of an F-100.

A few days earlier, he had commented that he had more missions in the Super Sabre than most of the pilots he flew with. "I'm so accustomed to the cockpit of the plane," he said, "that I sometimes feel I could take over the controls and fly it myself."

He never had a chance to find out. The F-100 was hit by ground fire and crashed in the jungle. Winters was the first AAVS combat photographer killed in action in Vietnam.

Darryl Winters was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross posthumously for his extraordinary achievements in an assignment that combined the high risks of tactical air operations and the perils of jungle warfare. By the nature of their duties, combat photographers and their peacetime counterparts in AAVS have to be where the action is, though their acts of heroism are sometimes obscured by the more spectacular work of the aircrews whose operations they record on film. That should not be.

In 1968, AAVS established the Darryl G. Winters Award, which is presented annually to an AAVS member in recognition of outstanding achievement. Winters's unique combat career remains an inspiration, particularly to those in his field, and still another demonstration that valor and dedication to duty know no bounds of age, rank, or professional duties. ■