

Four-engine fighters, phantom friendlies, duels with flak guns, and other tales from the forgotten world of the flareships.

BLIND BAT

BY SAM MCGOWAN

THE scene was Southeast Asia, 1966. After nightfall, we took off from Ubon, Thailand, flying east over Laos toward North Vietnam. It was my first ride Up North in a C-130 flareship, one of the most vital, yet least celebrated, aircraft in the war.

Our "target" that night was nighttime itself. Hanoi, recycling a tactic employed against France, was using darkness as a weapon, one that shielded southbound convoys from attack. We in the flareships sought to strip the enemy of this cover by turning night into day.

We pierced enemy airspace, skirted flak traps at Mu Gia Pass, and kicked four flares into the void. When they popped into brilliance, bathing the landscape in eerie brightness, we got an instant response. Cherry-red tracers sped toward us, shot past our wing, then burst in thunderous explosions just overhead—the nearest of near misses.

Close calls, I learned, were nothing if not routine for those engaged in "Blind Bat," a colorful, important, yet now almost forgotten Vietnam mission. What, exactly, was it?

Originally, the phrase Blind Bat was just the call sign for C-130s on forward air controller/flareship duty over southern Laos. Soon, it came to have a wider meaning, denoting an entire mission. By early 1966, all C-130 flareship operations in-theater went by the shorthand name Blind Bat.

In the early days, each C-130 operated as part of a four-ship formation, filled out by a pair of B-57 bombers and a Marine EF-10 for electronic-countermeasure support. Whether the group operated over North Vietnam or over Laos, the C-130 crew would "flare" while the B-57s bombed and the EF-10 jammed enemy radars. Later years found the C-130s working with F-4s and other fighters.

The Blind Bat mission lasted six years, from mid-1964 to mid-1970. Initially, flights originated at Da Nang, South Vietnam, and routinely overflew the North. In the spring of 1966, the flareship mission moved to Ubon. By that time, stronger air defenses had forced USAF to restrict flareship flights to the southern part of North Vietnam and the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos.

In their day, Blind Bat crews man-

aged to detect a great volume of traffic moving from North Vietnam into Laos and on into South Vietnam. When things went right, crews found targets and directed fighters to them with effectiveness. Experience gained by Bat crews was passed to AC-130 gunship operators, who often used hardware first tested in flareships. Today, however, these contributions go largely unrecognized.

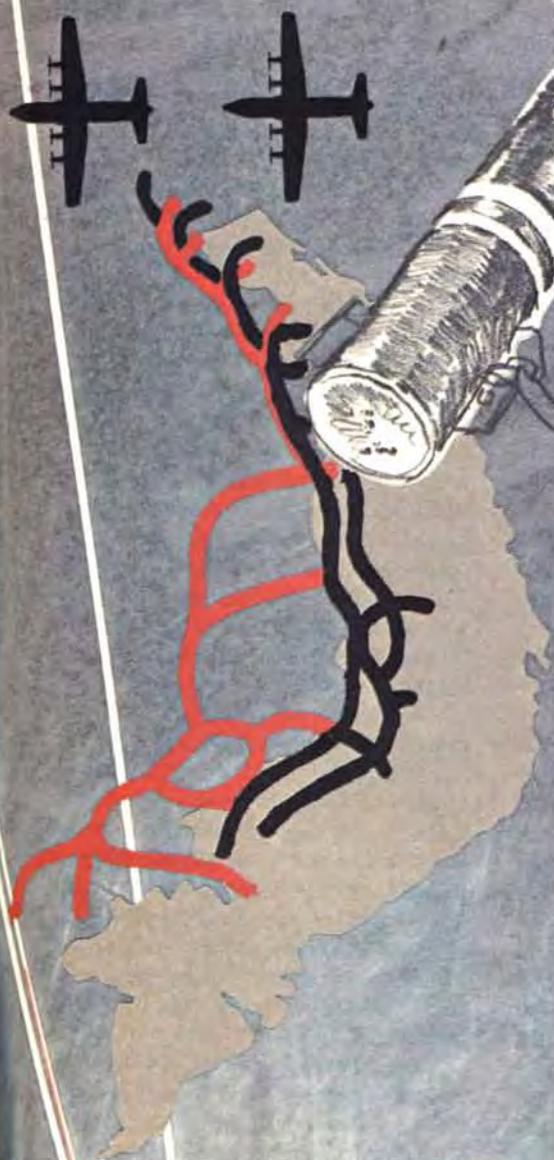
Tricks and Surprises

From the very start, the Blind Bat mission lent itself to tricks and surprises. Retired Lt. Col. William Cooke, who served as navigator on the original Blind Bat aircraft, recalls that the crew and C-130 arrived in Da Nang one morning and spent the balance of the day drawing up flight plans for the first mission that night. When they emerged at nightfall, they were astonished at what they found: Their C-130, sparkling silver only a few hours before, had been painted jet black.

There were other, more serious surprises. Much mission-aircraft equipment, especially locally manufactured flare-chutes used to disperse the illumination devices, was



Blind Bat



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found to be woefully defective. There were no clearly established operating procedures. What's more, the first missions were flown depending entirely on eyeballs. It was some weeks before crews were given binoculars to assist them in searching for targets. Only much later did they receive night-vision Starlight scopes.

The Impact Is Felt

As unsophisticated as the first Blind Bat operations may have been, they seem to have had an impact. That conclusion can fairly be drawn from the actions of the Communist forces themselves.

When Viet Cong sappers and mortar crews mounted their July 1965 attack on Da Nang airfield, the C-130 flareships were the first to be struck. Also destroyed was a C-130 airlifter parked nearby.

As the mission grew in scope and sophistication, so did Communist efforts to thwart the Blind Bat planes. Ground fire was an ever-present threat. The problem first reached dangerous proportions over North Vietnam, but soon became serious over Laos as well. Two Blind Bat C-130s were lost to enemy fire during the war, one in May 1968 and the other in November 1969, both over Laos.

On one Blind Bat mission, my crew became caught in a flak trap while I was serving as loadmaster near an open door. We had just come in for a flare drop when one of the orbiting fighters in our formation called over the radio for our pilot to "break."

Our pilot jerked the C-130 into a sharp vertical bank to the right and hauled back on the yoke. Those of us in the back held on to anything we could grab. When next we looked, enemy tracers were rocketing through the airspace where we would have been.

Blind Bat crews came to know certain flak emplacements as one does a mortal enemy. One such position was located near the Laotian village of Tchepone, where the enemy had mounted an anti-aircraft gun on a railroad car that could be hidden in a mountain tunnel or pulled out to fire. Innumerable airstrikes, even B-52 raids, were mounted to destroy that gun, but still it survived.

One Blind Bat crew that inadvertently overflowed this emplacement came uncomfortably close to destruction. When a flak round hit their plane's left wing, setting fire to the hydraulic fluid in the primary system, the crew jettisoned all flares and began preparations for bailout—an event dreaded by every flareship crew member. Just as the pilot, Maj. Jack Frank, was reaching for the bailout bell switch, however, the flight mechanic saw that the fire had gone out. The airplane was still flyable.

The problem, however, was that the hydraulic pressure needed to help operate the flight controls no longer existed. As the pilot made haste toward the nearest friendly airfield, the loadmasters, flight mechanic, and navigator came up with a solution. They attached two tie-down straps to the aileron bellcrank in the overhead cargo compartment. With the crew pulling on the tie-down straps to help bank the aircraft, Major Frank and the copilot, Lt. Charley Rief, managed to land the plane. Once on the ground, however, the crew saw what a close call they'd had: The fire had come within inches of a fuel tank.

Attacked by MiGs

After 1965, most "Blind Bat" missions were flown some distance from the SAM and MiG dens around Hanoi. On at least one occasion, though, a C-130 flareship was attacked by MiGs.

John Blewitt, a navigator on a C-130 providing flare support approximately 120 miles from Hanoi, was alerted by a "College Eye" AEW ship over Thailand that two MiGs had taken off from Hanoi and were heading fast in his direction. That caused the Blind Bat to drop down to treetop altitude, where it was able to evade the MiGs as they made two passes. When it was over, the crew realized that they had been flying between mountains, below the ridges, at night, in unfamiliar airspace.

Although ground fire was a preoccupation of Blind Bat crews, what I remember most vividly is the fatigue. We got shot at often enough, especially when over North Vietnam, but we were always tired, especially the enlisted crew members. Ubon had been built to house a

fighter wing, with no plans for night-flying enlisted men. Air-conditioning didn't exist. As a result of Thailand's oppressive heat and humidity, sleep became a near impossibility during the day.

Weight of flares and survival equipment contributed to fatigue. Crew members wore survival vests and parachutes. Whenever our aircraft banked or was thrown into a violent turn to evade ground fire, the increased G forces multiplied the weight of this equipment many times. We loadmasters handled twenty-seven-pound flares, each of which would instantly become an eighty-one-pound flare in a three-G turn. One night, when the flare business was slow and we had time to relax, the whole enlisted crew fell fast asleep—over North Vietnam.

Frequently, crews found themselves engaged in operations that were strange even by Blind Bat standards. For example, at times we would be called on to flare for unknown friendly forces on the ground in areas where no friendly forces were supposed to exist. These phantom friendlies could be found on the coast of the South China Sea, sometimes in the mountains of Laos.

One night, my crew was told to flare Thai territory between Ubon and the Mekong River, some twenty miles to the east. At the time, all we knew was that local radar had picked up unidentified low-flying craft. The Air Force has since revealed that Communist flights out of Laos and North Vietnam flew supplies to insurgents in northern Thailand. We happened to be involved in one of the few incidents when one of the flights was detected.

Frustrated Fighter Pilots?

Perhaps because the C-130 mission was owned by Tactical Air Command, our pilots thought of themselves as "four-engine fighter pilots." Many seemed to be frustrated fighter pilots anyway. Even enlisted crew members got caught up in the spirit, at times attacking enemy trucks or guns with anything at hand.

Several times on our way out of North Vietnam, for example, we would mount an "attack" on flak trap emplacements at Mu Gia Pass.

We would load six flares in the chute, set the fuzes to go off only after the flares reached the ground, and thus "bomb" the gun emplacements below. Enlisted crew members often fired their M16s at targets on the ground, until the fighter crews—fearful of being "holed" by a friendly round—put a stop to the practice.

Then there was the crew that managed to scrounge a recoilless rifle from the Marines. The Bat crew members had already chained the gun down in the cargo ramp and were about to unofficially introduce the AC-130 gunship concept to Vietnam, but it was not to be. Local US authorities, alerted by fighter crews, ordered the gun removed and returned.

Rewarding and Frustrating

The flare mission was rewarding and frustrating at the same time. By detecting and destroying enemy trucks, sampans, and troop formations, we knew, we were reducing the threat to our comrades slogging it out in rice paddies and jungles. That was the reward. The frustrations were equally strong.

Take, for example, the "restrictions." Strictly off limits were any vehicles or other suspected enemy targets found within the confines of anything even remotely resembling a village. A flareship crew might find Communist trucks on the trail, but it would take time for fighters to arrive. In addition, we would have to wait for our C-130 ABCCC (Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center) ships, orbiting high overhead, to obtain permission to attack. By the time the attack was finally cleared to proceed, the trucks would have turned off into a "village." Many, if not most, of these villages were specially constructed fakes. Aware of our restrictions, the Communist forces made provision to exploit them.

Another restriction prohibited attack against targets more than a hundred yards from an infiltration route. The Communists also knew about this constraint and frequently made camp just beyond the hundred-yard limit. I must report, however, that the hunter-killer teams were not always able to observe this fastidious restriction. More than a few camps, seemingly safe beyond

the hundred-yard limit, were demolished. By accident, of course.

Truth to tell, we in the flareships found another great frustration in the propensity of fighter pilots to miss targets. Flarelight did not provide the best of conditions for precision bombing. More to the point, many of the fighter pilots lacked experience. While the slower, prop-driven aircraft such as A-1s and A-26s were flown by men on their second and sometimes even third war who were quite accurate in their bombing, many of the "fast-mover" pilots were fresh from training. This was especially true with respect to F-4 pilots.

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One case in point was a near-fiasco that turned into an absolute triumph.

We had been briefed to be on the lookout for a particular ammunition dump in North Vietnam that was thought to be located in our designated patrol area. A few miles west of Dong Hoi, our flareship pilot thought he had spotted it. The aircraft commander, Capt. Bob Bartunek, called for the fighters. Soon a flight of F-4s came under our control. Yet, from our point of view, Air Force F-4s loaded with iron bombs amounted to just about the worst bombing combination possible. Our experience taught us to expect little.

The problems began. Six flares had been readied, and the "flare-kicker" was holding them in place with his legs. Now, you can only hold those heavy flares with your legs for a short time and then you have to release. But our pilots had

lost sight of the target. After fifteen minutes of circling and looking, the flare-kicker couldn't stand the strain any longer. He simply lifted his legs, and the six flares were gone.

Amid much confusion and shouting, the navigator again spotted the target. It was right below the string of accidentally launched flares! The first F-4 came in, pickled his load, and zoomed upward. He missed the target. The pilot of the second F-4, no doubt the least experienced, came in and made his drop. He missed too, dropping a mile wide and on the wrong side of the river.

Some fighter pilots, however, get lucky, and this fellow turned out to be one of them. When his bombs went off, they set off tremendous secondary explosions. He had hit the real dump—which nobody had even seen—entirely by accident.

Credit the F-4 Pilots

Flak suppression, however, is one area in which the F-4 pilots deserve high credit. When they used CBUs—that is, cluster bombs—they were murder. It always was a thrill to watch an F-4 "duel with the guns," with the enemy tracers spewing toward the attacking fighter and the winking lights of the bombs bursting all around the spot the tracers had come from.

As the 1960s came to a close, the flareships faced a new threat to their existence. This one could not be avoided like flak traps or MiGs. Seventh Air Force had decided to begin large deployment of new AC-130 gunships and had to find a way to pay for them. The money and manpower were found by laying up the flareships. Thus, in mid-1970, the Blind Bat mission was shut down for good.

Just how effective the mission really was, no one can say with any certainty. The best testimonials, perhaps, come from Communist soldiers who came down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to fight in the south. In postwar news interviews, they nearly always mentioned the presence of the flareships in the nighttime skies and how avoiding them had required constant effort. ■

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