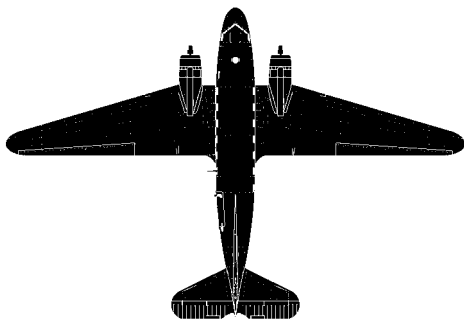


Airpower Classics

Artwork by Zaur Eylanbekov

AC-47D Gunship



As he beheld the humble C-47 pouring out of his plants in World War II, Donald W. Douglas could not have imagined that the Skytrain would be reincarnated, 20 years later, as one of history's most lethal aircraft—the AC-47D gunship. USAF modified just 53 of these side-firing heavyweights, but they were pivotal in the Vietnam War, where they made short work of enemy troops and suppressed thousands of enemy attacks.

An AC-47D gunship orbiting a ground target could lay down an awesome barrage within its signature “cone of fire.” The concept was simple: The gunship would fly a pylon turn around a target on the ground, with port-side guns laying down fire perpendicular to the line of flight. According to the Air Force, a three-second burst from all three guns would saturate an area, putting a round into every square foot of a target area the size of a football field. The AC-47 flew like an overloaded “Gooney Bird”—docile but

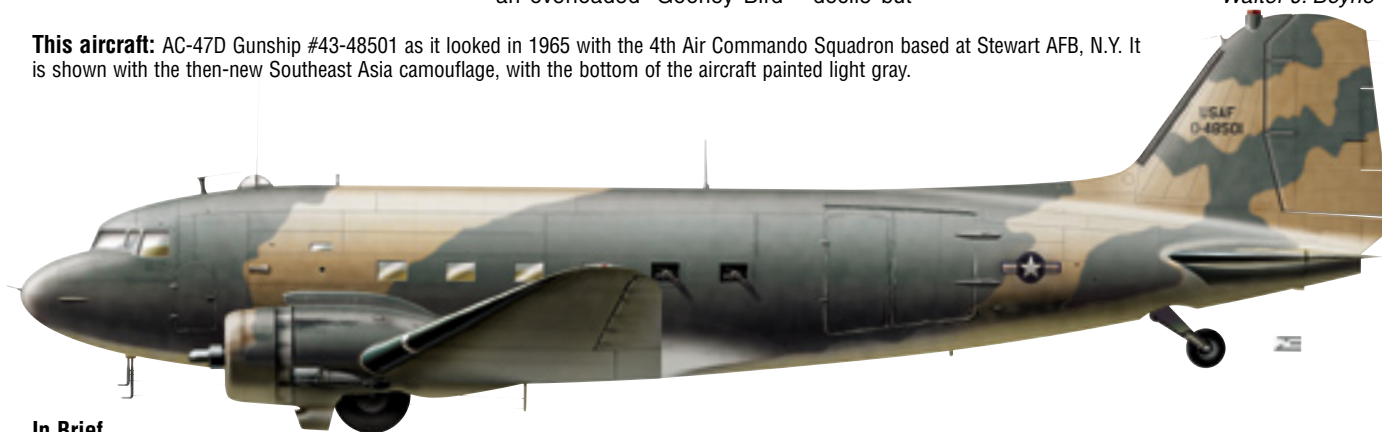
requiring care—and the crews worked mostly at night, using high-powered flares to light up a target.

The gunships began operations at Bien Hoa AB, South Vietnam, in December 1964. They were instantly popular. The AC-47D not only devastated attacking units but also bolstered the morale of beleaguered defenders. Its gunfire—laced with tracers expended at the rate of 20 per second—made a dramatic visual impact on any observer. At the communist siege of the US garrison at Khe Sanh in 1968, the AC-47 did yeoman work, pinning down enemy troops and illuminating their positions with flares.

Life, however, was short; after five years, the AC-47 was replaced by the larger AC-130A and AC-119G/K types. By then, however, the gunship's place in special operations had been firmly established.

—Walter J. Boyne

This aircraft: AC-47D Gunship #43-48501 as it looked in 1965 with the 4th Air Commando Squadron based at Stewart AFB, N.Y. It is shown with the then-new Southeast Asia camouflage, with the bottom of the aircraft painted light gray.



In Brief

Douglas design (C-47) ★ built by Douglas ★ first gunship combat mission Dec. 15, 1964 ★ first flight (C-47) Dec. 23, 1941 ★ crew 7-8 ★ two P&W radial engines ★ total conversions, 53 (of 13,177 C-47s) ★ **Specific to AC-47D:** max speed 230 mph ★ cruise speed 175 mph ★ max range 1,600 miles (loaded) ★ armament three 7.62 mm GE GAU-2 miniguns, 48 flares ★ ammo load 16,500 rounds ★ weight 31,000 lb (loaded) ★ span 95 ft ★ length 64 ft 5 in ★ height 16 ft 11 in.

Famous Fliers

A1C John L. Levitow, Medal of Honor ★ Sgt. Nacey Kent Jr., Air Force Cross ★ Capt. Willard M. Collins, AFC ★ 1st Lt. Delbert Peterson, AFC ★ Capt. Jack Harvey and Capt. Lee Johnson, first to fly operational gunships.

Interesting Facts

Each gun could fire 6,000 rounds per minute ★ of 3,926 hamlets and outposts defended, none fell when protected by AC-47 ★ nicknamed “Spooky,” “Puff the Magic Dragon,” “Dragonship” ★ first designation “FC-47” (“fighter-cargo”) dropped after complaints from fighter pilots ★ 15 lost in Vietnam War ★ expended 97 million rounds ★ killed more than 5,300 enemy troops ★ five still in service with Colombian Air Force.



An AC-47 flies over South Vietnam during the Vietnam War.