

The Night

When the sun goes down, the workday is just beginning at Hurlburt Field, Fla., for Air Force Special Operations Command's gunship crews.

Photography by Guy Aceto



Shift



An AC-130 gunship ground crew on the flight line at Hurlburt Field, Fla., consults before launching a night training flight. The firepower provided by Air Force Special Operations Command gunships is awesome.



The gunship mission is in high demand, and crew members are deployed about 120 days per year. This year alone, the gunships of the 16th Special Operations Wing at Hurlburt Field, Fla., have flown more than 1,300 combat sorties totaling more than 8,000 combat hours. They are feared by enemies and beloved by friendly ground forces for their ability to rain down devastating fire at extremely close range.

Seen at left is the business end of an AC-130H—a 40 mm cannon and a 105 mm howitzer. The bulge between the two gun barrels houses a targeting radar. The gunship orbits above a target and delivers fire continuously on a specific location, creating the legendary “cone of fire.”



Clockwise from above: An air commando drops a clip of 40 mm rounds into the cannon at the rear of the gunship. Behind him, another member of the load crew stands ready. • The earliest version of the AC-130, on static display. In the foreground are its two 20 mm guns; visible at the rear of the aircraft is the A model's howitzer. The AC-130 is the latest in a long line of successful gunships, a legacy that includes weaponized C-131s, AC-47s, and AC-119s. • An AC-130H belonging to the 16th Special Operations Squadron is readied for a night-time training mission. Today, the 16th SOW boasts two gunship squadrons—one flying 13 AC-130Us and the other operating eight venerable AC-130Hs, some of which saw action in Vietnam.



Above, weapons loaders insert a 105 mm shell aboard the aircraft.

Gunships are vulnerable, so they have always operated at night and are today equipped with a dazzling array of defensive capabilities. The ball seen at upper right is a Directional Infrared Countermeasures (DIRCM) pod, which is used to thwart heat-seeking missiles.

Right, the pilot's head-up display.



A1C Aaron Lewis (left) and SSgt. Thomas Hinkle swab out the interior of the cannon. The 105 mm howitzer is huge, and, like any gun, it still needs regular cleaning. At right, a crewman monitors the 40 mm gun.





Top left, the AC-130's engines and external fuel tanks are clearly visible. Note the metal "bucket" covering the rear of the engine. These shrouds help block and suppress the heat signature of the aircraft's four turboprop engines.

Thomas Hinkle performing maintenance on an AC-130U's 40 mm gun.

Left, a flight crew goes over the mission paperwork in advance of the night's mission.

Above, a gunship is lit up after dark on the Hurlburt ramp.

Top right are SSgt. Zachary Ross (l), A1C Aaron Lewis (in BDUs), and SSgt.

Serial No. 575, parked on the Hurlburt ramp, is a Vietnam War veteran. The 40 mm Bofors cannon was actually designed as an anti-aircraft gun and was used extensively for that purpose in World War II. The AC-130Hs added the 105 mm howitzer in 1972.

In addition to the 105 mm howitzer and 40 mm cannon, the newer U model gunships belonging to the 4th Special Operations Squadron also sport a 25 mm Gatling gun. These gunships can target two locations at once.





Above, the AC-130U weapons layout seen in profile. At the front is the 25 mm Gatling gun; the two larger caliber weapons are aft of the rear landing gear. AFSOC plans to soon replace the ancient 25 mm guns used on the AC-130Us with modern 30 mm Bushmasters offering better range, accuracy, and firepower.



At left, the weapons team carefully tends to a specially designed weapons storage crate.

Below, an AC-130H of the 16th SOS fires up an engine as takeoff time approaches. The night's mission will last more than seven hours and includes time to calibrate weapons, perform a midair refueling with night vision goggles, and lay down live fire in support of Special Forces training on the ground.





Clockwise from top left: Detail of the early Vietnam era AC-47 Spooky on static display at the USAF Armament Museum near Hurlburt. The nickname now applies to the entire fleet of AC-130U gunships. Older AC-130Hs are called Spectres. • With a shot on its way, the breech of the huge 105 mm gun is rocked all the way back. The crew member at left is reaching for the next round to load. • A bucket heat shield attached to the rear of the turboprop engine. • Loadmaster MSgt. Scott Dennis calculates fuel requirements for that evening's mission. • The open door reveals a tracking system. On a regular C-130, this would be a crew entrance.





At left, three H model AC-130s are being readied on the ramp. After Vietnam, these legendary gunships have seen action over Grenada, Panama, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

Below, a gunship is obvious even head-on; numerous bumps and blisters house special mission equipment and distinguish it from a "slick" C-130.



Above, maintainers at work on a wing.

Below, a gunship at the start of a night-time training mission soars over the Gulf of Mexico.

Today's AC-130 gunship is in heavy demand and will continue to be sent wherever ground forces need additional firepower. ■



USAF photo