

What was the roll of a military navigator in the 1970's?

I was in Vietnam as a navigator from May 1972 to March 1973 flying 113 missions over enemy territory in an AC-119k gunship, a two propeller, twin tail, black colored aircraft. We flew up and down the Ho Chi Minh trail in Vietnam and the East side of Cambodia where the Viet Cong traveled down the Ho Chi Minh Trail into Southern Vietnam. We also flew "Cap" around our air bases in Vietnam to let the bases know when rockets were being launched against them. It was safer being in the air than on the ground during the night!



AC-119K Gunship

In order to understand what a navigator was and why he was needed in Vietnam please let me back up a year or two and explain what, where and why I became a navigator. I graduated from the University of Redlands, in Redlands, California, May 1970, while the war in Vietnam was still going very strong. I had enlisted in the United States Air Force (USAF) in March before graduating from Redlands University. From there I drove to San Antonio, Texas to complete my three-month Air Force Officer Training School (OTS) course to become an officer in the USAF. After graduating from OTS, I drove back to California to attend a nine-month Navigator training course at Mather Air Force Base, Sacramento, California.

Now 50 years later, the Global Positioning Satellites (GPS) system has taken over the navigator's job in an airplane.

At Mather Air Force Base I flew in a T-29 aircraft, better known as a C-131, with six consoles one for each of the six navigator trainees on board. There were 6 small holes in the top of this airplane spaced 6 feet apart down the fuselage for inserting a sextant in each hole.



T-29 Aircraft

Before flying in this aircraft, I attended ground school which consisted of map reading, dead reckoning, star sighting, LORAN (Long Range Navigation System) usage, the use of the sextant for night overwater navigation as well as identifying the flying route on a chart. I also learned how to keep meticulous track of airspeed and compass heading while adding corrections for wind so the plane didn't get off course.

Upon completing navigator ground school, I flew in the T-29 airplane while conducting basic navigation over specified land routes to increase my familiarity with the navigational instruments. Night time navigation was my last phase of training with the use of the sextant.

At night the navigator would first pick three stars out of a star manual and stand up on a step stool to find these stars with the sextant - all within a few minutes of each star. This would give him a line of position for each star and hope the lines intersect to a point on his chart. That would be where the plane was a few minutes ago (very hectic!). After that the navigator would predict a course adjustment, if needed, and tell the pilot a new heading for the plane. (I like to say "telling the pilot where to go"!)

After completing nine months of navigator training, students selected the aircraft they would be flying according to their ranking in the class. I was near the middle of my class of 72 students and I selected the oldest aircraft in the military inventory going to Vietnam. I wanted to support the war effort and my country, and I did not want to fly in the back seat of an F4 fighter jet. Many of these planes were being shot down by enemy artillery in 1972. I selected an RB-57 aircraft. This jet-engine aircraft was used in the Korean War as a bomber aircraft. The Air Force had converted this airplane into a reconnaissance aircraft flying low over enemy territory while taking pictures of potential bombing targets and enemy encampments.



RB-57 Aircraft

To my disappointment the Air Force “bone yarded” this airplane before I had a chance to even see it. They asked me what else I would like to fly-in going to Vietnam. I was still looking for an old plane in Vietnam so I asked for an AC-119K gunship.

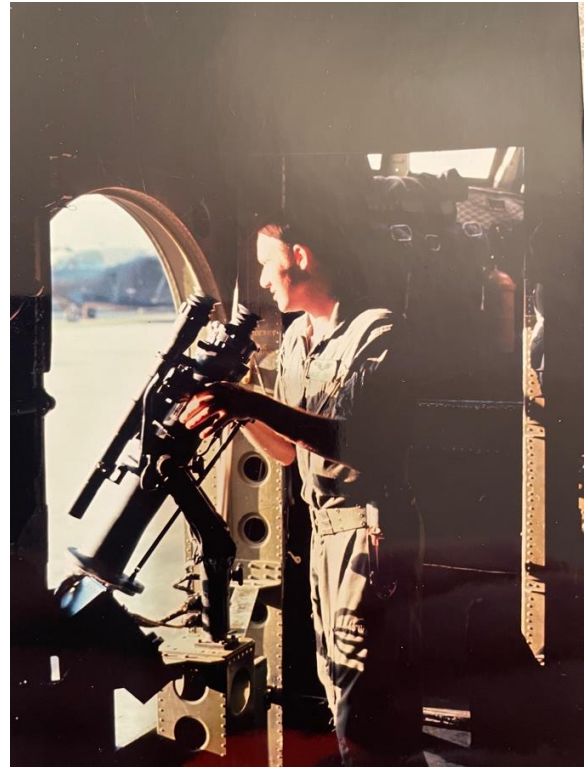
The C-119 aircraft was converted from a WWII cargo plane into a gunship. Thus, the new identifier of AC-119K for “attack plane” with jet pods (K). Because it was so heavy with ammunition aboard, the plane required jet pods to lift the airplane off the ground on takeoff. The mission of this aircraft was to fly low and slow at nighttime providing close air support with South Vietnamese ground troops, as well as attacking targets on the Ho Chi Minh Trail during the later years of the Vietnam War, (1968-1973). The AC-119K gunships call sign was “Stinger.”

The AC119K gunship had an upper deck where the pilot, co-pilot, engineer, and two navigators sat. The navigators sat with their backs to the pilots. The lower deck held all the ammunition, four 7.62 mini-guns, and two 20-millimeter guns manned by four gunners. There was also a big storage rack of 20 flares operated by a flare operator near the back of the planes open side door. A third navigator operated the Night Operation Sensor (NOS) located near the middle left side of the plane. I was qualified in all three navigator positions:

1. the primary navigator’s job was to get the airplane into the area of interest
2. the Forward Looking Infar-Red (FLIR) position, was a basic Black & White TV monitor with a hand held gimble the Navigator would slew back and forth and up and down to watch for enemy personnel, trucks, sampans and support of the friendly Vietnamese via Troops in Contact (TIC’s). The FLIR camera was outside the left side of the plane looking like a big bubble.
3. The Night Observation Sensor navigator was used similarly like the FLIR position to locate enemy personnel, trucks and sampans either with the use of flares to visually see the ground or with moon light. This four-inch round scope was over two feet long and sat on a pedestal looking out the left side of the airplanes open door.



4 mini & Two 20MM guns on left side of plane. Also FLIR camera



Night Observation Sensor (NOS)



Call sign "Stinger"



100 mission patch

I had three months training (February-April, 1972) in the AC-119K gunship at Eglin Air Force Base in northern Florida and then drove to San Francisco to board more flights to eventually land at Nakhon Phanom, Thailand. I was stationed at three different bases while in Vietnam: Nakhon Phanom in Northeastern Thailand

near the Laotian border, Bien Hoa Air Base near Saigon and Da Nang Air Base just below the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) in South Vietnam. We always flew at night (10:00pm to 5:00am) not only because the enemy moved around at night but also because our aircraft was painted black (an easy target to hit in the daytime). We flew at 3,500 to 5,000 feet above ground and would usually fly in a left circle so the command pilot could see out the left side of the plane looking for the enemy and controlling the guns from his side. My task as the sensor navigator was to scout for enemy positions in our assigned area by using the NOS or FLIR. Upon my recognizing an enemy concentration the pilot would roll the aircraft into a 30 degree left bank and fire at the enemy on the ground using the mini or 20MM guns. (If all the guns were available at the same time a bullet would hit every square foot the size of a football field).



Ben Hoa Air Base



My Flight Uniform



Mustache and pistol



Dreaming of her everyday

Our plane was fired upon from the ground almost every night we flew. If I was the NOS operator at the open door I would watch as the bullets flashed by our plane. I was only looking at the red tracer bullets. There were many more than just the ones that I could see. We always wondered when we would one day be hit. One time when we were in eastern Cambodia (the elephant's foot) we experienced one of the first SA-7 rockets (a portable rocket that could be launched from an enemy on a bicycle) fired at our plane. I was the FLIR operator during this flight and after the flare operator shouted on the intercom that a rocket had been launched at our

plane (Rocket, Rocket!!) I almost broke off the gimble handle I was so scared. The plane dove for the ground and the flare operator threw all kinds of flares out the door in hopes the rocket would track on the flares and not the plane. It was a very, very tense situation knowing we could have been shot out of the sky. We were lucky.

On another flying mission we were assigned to support a TIC operation (troops in contact) just north of Bien Hoa Air Base. When we arrived on scene the North Vietnamese were overrunning a small town where the South Vietnamese were entrenched. The person on the ground called to our plane for help and told us where to fire our ammunition at the enemy. We did hit the enemy and saved many South Vietnamese lives. I remember the operator on the ground saying "Stinger, you number one! You kill 30 Vietcong!" We were very pleased to help and many weeks later our crew received the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) award for this flight operation.

I usually flew five times a week. When not flying I slept, played bridge (the card game), wrote letters to my future wife, Jeanne Fletcher, or went to the movies if there was one on base. I would also try calling home from the MARS station on base. This radio telephone system was designed to make personal calls back home to the states. There were operators patching from one station to the next. To reach Illinois where Jeanne lived at her parent's house would take two to three patch lines of operators.

The end of the war finally drew to a close on 23 January, 1973 when Henry Kissinger (the U.S. Secretary of State) and the North Vietnam delegation declared a cease fire. President Nixon announced the Vietnam peace accords with the following conditions:

1. All American prisoners of war would be returned within 60 days.
2. All American military forces would be out of South Vietnam in 60 days
3. The people of South Vietnam would be guaranteed the right to determine their own future

Within two years North Vietnam would attack South Vietnam again, and this time South Vietnam would become a communist country, WITHOUT AMERICAN ASSISTANCE.

***The Vietnam War**

The United States participated in the Vietnam War from 1955 to 1975 (20 years). Vietnam had been a French Colony up until 1955 and the Vietnamese wanted their independence from France and have their own government. Vietnam split their country into North and South because the North wanted to be communist and the South wanted to be a democratic nation.

The Viet Cong, a South Vietnamese force under the direction of North Vietnam, initiated guerilla warfare in the south to take over South Vietnam. They established the Ho Chi Minh Trail which funneled supplies, troops, trucks and equipment from the north. This trail was located along the Laotian and Cambodian borders to avoid conflicts in Vietnam.

The US became involved because the South Vietnamese government asked for help. US involvement had been a thousand military advisors up until 1962 when President Kennedy increased our military advisors to 23,000. In 1964 a US ship had a naval conflict with North Vietnamese torpedo boats, later called the Gulf of Tonkin Incident. At that point President Johnson escalated the conflict by sending more and more US military soldiers to South Vietnam to the point that we were sending military forces by the thousands into Vietnam. The North Vietnamese also increased their Viet Cong military forces in South Vietnam to 40,000 soldiers. What began as assistance to this government became a conflict to stop communism in this region.

As I look back at this civil war, I believe the United States really didn't act to end the war militarily. We kept sending thousands of troops to South Vietnam but would only let them accomplish certain acts that the President and his policy makers would approve. The military had its hands tied due to their political policies.

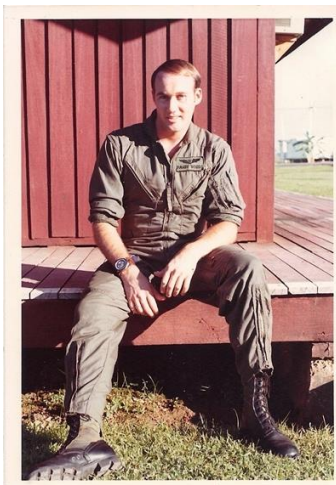
By 1966 and continuing through 1970, when I graduated from college, the youth in the United States began to resent our government sending its young people to a place they did not know nor could they care less about the civil war in Vietnam. Many young college students became hippies or left the United States for Canada just to avoid going to Vietnam. They became known as draft doggers. Others tried to fight our government by protesting the war with peaceful demonstrations that would sometimes turn into rioting in the streets. Eventually the youth protested the war at the seat of our government buildings. The youth were upset with this war because it impacted them the most as many of their friends were dying in Vietnam.

Our government began drafting men to support this war by 1969 as more men were needed. A lottery system was created, set by the date of your birthday. My birthday, 28 May, was draft number 308 based on 365 days in the year. Those with low numbers received their draft orders and were to report to the nearest draft headquarters in their state. Many never showed up, but protested. Others were sent to military bases for a few months of training and then were immediately sent to Vietnam.

I was lucky as far as my draft number was concerned. But with my father still in the military stationed in Hawaii, as the Chief of Chaplains in the Pacific, I thought it right to support our country in this war effort and fight for South Vietnam's freedom.

I graduated from college in 1970 and joined the US Air Force. First was my training in San Antonio, Texas to be a military officer. I then specialized in the aircraft I would fly as a navigator in Vietnam. I flew in an AC-119K gunship in Vietnam from May 1972 to March 1973. I arrived in a city called Nakhon Phanom at a US military base in eastern Thailand bordering Laos. There I found my living quarters just like my 8th grade military barracks in Texas. It was a barracks sharing the room with 3 other men in my unit.

Probably the only perk in going to Vietnam was to buy a new stereo music system. The base exchange (a military store like a Costco store) had every kind of stereo system one could imagine. I bought my reel-to-reel Akai tape recorder, 4 huge Sansui speakers, a new Sansui receiver and a four channel Dual phonograph player. I hauled all this equipment back with me from Vietnam and still use the stereo system.



**Randy's Flight suit
in Vietnam**



My gunship friends

Besides flying most every night in a gunship we were granted a couple three-day R & R (Rest and Recreation) vacations to release some of the stress of war. I would get on a military plane flying to Bangkok, Thailand and take a bus south to a wonderful vacation spot called Pattaya Beach. I rented a small boat to go waterskiing and spent the rest of the day resting, reading and partying with the other military members. Twice I spent my R & R's at Pattaya Beach I enjoyed it so much. Just after the end of the Vietnam War, I coordinated a dinner with my parents and my sister in Bangkok, Thailand at the new Dusit Thani Hotel. The restaurant on top of the hotel had a marvelous view of the city below. Dad and mom came over from Hawaii where Dad was stationed in the military, and Lynn, my sister, was an officer in the Air Force stationed in Korat, Thailand, just a few miles northeast of Bangkok. To meet and have the family have dinner half a world apart from the United States was amazing.



Ready to go waterskiing

Beautiful beach by the Pattaya Beach Hotel

The American gunship crews spent their last five months of the war at Da Nang Air Force Base training the South Vietnamese military students to perform our aircraft duties. We then turned the aircraft over to them before leaving Vietnam. Da Nang, known as "Rocket City," was always under alert from incoming North Vietnamese rockets. They always flew into Da Nang in the evening letting the enemy escape in the dark. This happened so often that most liked to be flying at night to avoid the rockets landing on our base.

Those last five months at Da Nang kept all the crews focused. We were either flying or ground training. To fill the spare time we wrote letters back home, watched movies at the theater or visited the club on base to forget about the war and avoid the incoming rockets.

I was the night duty officer one evening the first week in March 1973. My duty was to monitor the training flights from my control room on the ground. That night the fog over Da Nang was so thick that the last training flight could not return to land. The gunship crew could not see the airfield and there was nowhere else to land. The crew bailed out over the ocean and crashed the aircraft in the water. All 14 airmen parachuted successfully in the water. Disaster struck when a rescue boat arrived. A Vietnamese airman forgot to release his chute from his harness. The parachute caught the boat's propeller and dragged the airman under the water to his death. That accident stopped all training flights forever and the American crews were sent back to the United States – except for the night duty officer (me) to explain the incident and the further investigation. I stayed an extra week in Vietnam until 14 March 1973.

The war in Vietnam ended in January 1973 with Nixon's declaration of "Peace with Honor." According to this agreement with North Vietnam all American forces would depart Vietnam by the end of March 1973. I departed Da Nang the middle of March heading for Aurora, Illinois to meet my future bride,

Jeanne Fletcher. The plane lifted off the runway and all of us began singing, yelling and celebrating that we were finally leaving Vietnam! A wonderful feeling and yet we were hesitant about what to expect from the Americans back home of the military and the Vietnam War.



South Vietnamese Students

The Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC)

On the evening of 3 October 1972 our AC119K gunship (Call sign “Stinger”) and it’s 10 crewmembers were flying out of Bien Hoa Air Field, Vietnam, near Saigon, when we were notified of a friendly outpost 80 miles North of our airplane being overrun by the Viet Cong (VC) forces. Having been given permission to support this outpost we flew to where the activity was extremely active from the North Vietnamese trying to overrun the outpost. We received enemy hostile anti-aircraft fire and with marginal weather conditions the situation was extremely dicey.

We were able to repel the enemy’s attacks with the help of a friendly ground coordinator. He directed us to the exact location of the enemy, 20 meters away from the outpost. After we had dispensed our four mini machine guns (7.62 MM) and both our 20 mm machine guns ammunition on that position, the ground coordinator notified us of our assistance by saying: “Stinger, You number one!! You kill over 30 VC”! We felt very good about repelling this attack and saving the friendly outpost. In times of war, that is what is needed to help those from being overrun and killed.

For our valiant effort in saving many lives my crew members and I received the Air Force’s Distinguished Flying Cross Medal, a year after leaving Vietnam. The definition in Wikipedia states that “this medal is awarded to any officer or enlisted person of the United States Air Force for heroism or extraordinary achievement while participating in aerial flight. Both heroism and achievement must be entirely distinctive, involving operations that are not routine”. I think we accomplished that definition with this flight that day.

Over my 20 years in the United States Air Force I have been stationed in many special, unique and isolated places. From Texas to Florida to Vietnam and Thailand, to Hawaii and California then to Greenland and inside a mountain in Colorado. The experiences gained from each of these places have given me a wealth of knowledge about our world and how other nations view the United States. I do appreciate what the Air Force has given me and acknowledge this experience as I continue to visit other counties around the world in my retirement from the Air Force.



Awards ceremony at Hickam AFB, Hawaii with Jeanne, Mom and Dad



CITATION TO ACCOMPANY THE AWARD OF
THE DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS

TO

RANSOM B. WOODS III

First Lieutenant Ransom B. Woods III distinguished himself by extraordinary achievement while participating in aerial flight as an AC-119K Navigator in Southeast Asia on 3 October 1972. On that date, Lieutenant Woods' crew responded to a tactical emergency declared by a friendly outpost being threatened by hostile forces. Despite marginal weather conditions and hostile antiaircraft fire, Lieutenant Woods' crew made repeated attacks causing thirty one hostile casualties and resulting in the friendly position being saved. The professional competence, aerial skill, and devotion to duty displayed by Lieutenant Woods reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.



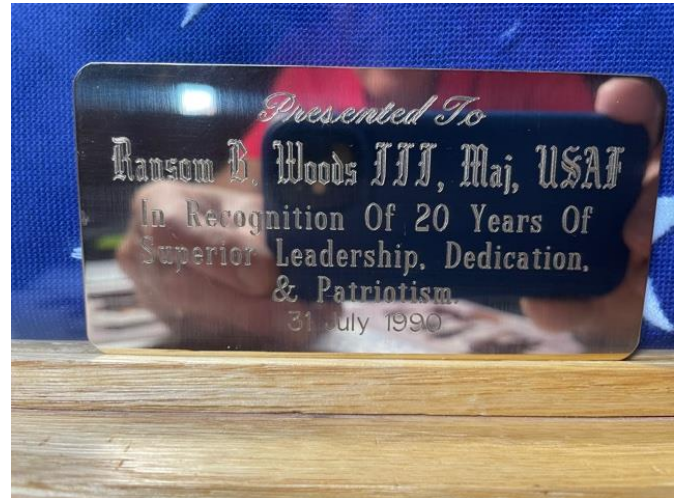
Military Memorabilia

It is difficult to save all the memorabilia from 20 years in the military but Jeanne has made sure that I cleaned up my military souvenirs and disposed of most of them. I have saved two special souvenirs from Vietnam when I was a first lieutenant in the United States Air Force in 1973. While at Da Nang Air Force Base, I met a South Vietnamese artist who made brass cigarette ashtrays out of the ends of 105 MM shells. He made it look exceptionally decorative by engraving your name, date in Vietnam, plane you flew on and a special place to remember - "Da Nang by the Sea" on the top of the ashtray. The artist also made brass mugs out of the 105 MM shells with special engraving on both sides of the mug. (see below)



I polished the brass on both mug and ashtray and then clear-coat varnished them so they would last forever. These souvenirs will always remind me of my military one year tour in Vietnam.









Upon retirement from the Air Force, I was presented with a triangular wooden shadow box with a United States flag that was flown over the US capital. The inscription on the brass plate reads “ In recognition of 20 years of Superior Leadership, Dedication, and Patriotism,” 31 July 1990. I keep this remembrance on top of my filing cabinet behind my desk. I am still very proud of my dedication and service to my country and will keep this retirement shadow box with me forever.



My last memorabilia from the United States Air Force are the medals and decorations that I have been awarded. I was awarded 19 medals and decorations with numerous oak leaf clusters on some of the medals and ribbons. (A bronze oak leaf cluster (OLC) stands for one additional medal or ribbon. A silver oak leaf cluster on a medal or ribbon stand for five additional awards.)



MAJOR WOODS MILITARY DECORATIONS, AWARDS and OAK LEAF CLUSTERS (OLC)

1.  **Distinguished Flying Cross Medal**
Awarded for heroism and extraordinary achievement while participating in an aerial flight. 18 Special Operations Squadron (Vietnam)
2.  **Meritorious Service Medal (1 OLC)**
Awarded for outstanding meritorious achievement or service to the United States. Det.3, Thule AFB & Space Surveillance Center (Greenland & NORAD)
3.  **Air Medal (6 OLC)**
Awarded for heroic or meritorious achievement while participating in aerial flight. One OLC = 15 flights in combat enemy territory. I had 115 enemy territory flights over Vietnam
4.  **Air Force Commendation Medal (1 OLC)**
Awarded for heroism, meritorious achievement or meritorious service. 15 Operations Squadron & 6594 Test Group (Hawaii)
5.  **Air Force Outstanding Unit Award (3 OLC)**
Awarded to numbered units that have distinguished themselves by exceptionally meritorious service or outstanding achievement that clearly sets the unit above and apart from similar units. 18 Special Operations Squadron & 6594 Test Group (3) (Vietnam and Hawaii)
6.  **Air Force Organizational Excellence Award (1 OLC)** Awarded to recognize the achievements and accomplishments of various Air Force activities and organizations. 18 Special Operations Squadron & 6594 Test Group (Vietnam & Hawaii)
7.  **Combat Readiness Medal**
Awarded to those who have "accomplished sustained individual combat mission readiness. 18 Special Operations Squadron (Vietnam)
8.  **National Defense Service Medal**
Awarded for military service during periods of national emergency or any other periods designated by the Secretary of Defense (Air Force)
9.  **Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal**

Awarded to participating personnel who have served at least 30 consecutive (60 nonconsecutive) days in the qualifying operation or less if the operation was less than 30 days in length. (Korea)

10.



Vietnam Service Medal

Awarded to all service members during the Vietnam War. (Vietnam)
One bronze star for the one campaign "in country"

11.



Humanitarian Service Medal (3OLC)

Awarded for meritorious direct participation in a significant military act or operation of a humanitarian nature (15 Air Base Wing & 6594 Test Group, Hawaii & AF Satellite Control Facility (2), California)

12.



Air Force Overseas Short Tour Ribbon (1OLC)

Awarded for a permanent duty station assignment of at least 300 days within an 18 month period. (Vietnam & Det 3 at Thule, Greenland)

13.



Air Force Overseas Long Tour Ribbon

Awarded after the completion of a standard overseas service assignment, usually longer than two years in length. (Hawaii)

14.



Air Force Longevity Service Award Ribbon (4OLC)

Awarded to all service members of the U.S. Air Force who complete four years of honorable active or reserve military service with any branch of the United States military. (20 years in the Air Force)

15.



Small Arms Expert Marksmanship Ribbon

Award to recognize Airmen who have reached the expert proficiency in either the service rifle or pistol. (Hawaii)

16.



Air Force Training Ribbon

Awarded to Air Force personnel on completion of Basic Military Training (Officer Training School (OTS) based in San Antonio, Texas)

17.



Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross /Palm

Awarded for accomplishing deeds of valor or displaying heroic conduct while fighting the enemy. (Vietnam)

18.



Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal

Awarded for wartime service and support of military operations in Vietnam by the South Vietnamese military (Vietnam)

19.



Republic of Vietnam Air Service Medal

Awarded to 18th Special Operations Squadron for their military air support from 1972-1973. (Vietnam)

Other badges on my military uniform

Major rank in the US Air Force – gold leaf on shoulders



Senior Navigator Wings - 7 years as a rated navigator



Master Space & Missile Badge–15 or more years in Space Ops



Republic of Vietnam Military Navigator Diploma/Wings

Awarded to 18 Special Operations Squadron Navigators for the support and training of the South Vietnamese military Air Force.

16 April 73

COMBAT CERTIFICATE

1. This is to certify that the below information has been extracted from the individual flight record of 1Lt Ransom B. Woods III, 138-40-9055.

- a. Total number of SEA (Out of Country) combat missions: 0.
- b. Total number of SEA in country combat missions: 115 in aircraft AC119K.
- c. Total SEA (Out of Country) combat hours: 0.
- d. Total SEA in country combat hours: 360.1.
- e. Total combat time: 360.1.
- f. Inclusive dates: 1 June 72 - 28 February 73.

2. This information is to update individual's Personnel Record.

Wanda Chang

WANDA CHANG, Civ'
Flight Records Clerk

Cy to: 1Lt Ransom B. Woods III

1Lt. Ransom B. Woods III Combat Certificate