21st SOS CH-3, "Knife 51 and 52," formation operating over Laos in 1969. (Photo from Robert Arnau)

Capt. Joseph W. "Bud" Kerr: Special Operations in Laos 1968-69

By Cal Taylor

Capt. Bud Kerr somewhere on a Laotian ridge. (From the Bud Kerr collection)

Special Operations Reached Maturity in Southeast Asia

Air Force special operations aircraft and procedures developed slowly and fitfully through WWII and the Korean War. Helicopters were among the first special operations aircraft, finally reaching maturity in the Vietnam War. In October 1968, Capt. Joseph W. (Bud) Kerr arrived at Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base (NKP) to fly the giant Sikorsky CH-3 helicopter with the 21st Special Operations Squadron. During the next year, Captain Kerr amassed an outstanding record of combat accomplishment that was recognized by the award of numerous medals including two Silver Stars, a pair of Distinguished Flying Crosses, a Bronze Star and eight Air Medals.

Air Force Special Operations--a brief history

The military activity that came to be known as Special Operations goes well back in military history. The armies of many countries included unique groups that conducted operations using methods and procedures that the main formations did not employ. Sometimes, conventional forces even disparaged such activities. Within the American context, Francis "Swamp Fox" Marion in the Revolutionary War and the Civil War's General J.E.B. Stuart conducted special operations. During WWII, the British 7th Armored Division, in North Africa and Germany's Lt. Col. Otto Skorzeny carried out extensive special (or commando) operations.

Sometimes known as commandos, American special forces in WWII operated in Europe, North Africa, the Philippines and the China-Burma-India (CBI) theater. Aviation units were added to the mix, much of which operated under the direction of Gen. William Donovan's Office of Strategic Services (OSS) established by presidential order on June 13, 1942.

The first special operations air mission occurred on December 24, 1942. Lt. Col. Philip Cochran piloted one of

21st SOS operating area in southern Laos (Google)

a pair of C-47s to drop troops who destroyed the El Djem bridge in Tunisia. Ten months later, what was probably the first dedicated special operations aircraft was a B-17 belonging to the Fifth Bombardment Wing in North Africa.[1] During the rest of the war, special air operations increased greatly in capability and scope.

Air commando operations under that rubric began in the CBI. The First Air Commando Group (ACG), commanded by now Col. Philip Cochran, was established to support Brigadier Orde Wingate's 1944 operations in Burma. Soon after, it was expanded to a division. Gen. Hap Arnold authorized two more groups before the war's end. They were the Second Air Commando Group in the CBI and the Third in the Philippines. Learning of the new helicopters being tested, the 1st ACG requested that four Sikorsky R-4Bs be sent to Burma.[2]

The development that links most closely to Kerr's assignment to NKP was the early helicopters used in the CBI. The first Army helicopter was the Sikorsky R-4. It was slow and limited in cargo capacity and performance. But, it was capable enough to prove the type's usefulness to the U.S. Army Air Forces (AAF). Despite severely limited capability in Burma's heat and operating elevations, an Air Commando R-4 piloted by 1st Lt. Carter Harman was able to affect the first AAF helicopter rescue on April 25-26, 1944. First Air Commando Sgt. Pilot Ed "Murphy" Hladovcak had crash-landed his L-1 aircraft behind Japanese lines with three wounded British soldiers on board. Taxing his YR-4B helicopter to its performance limits, Harmon made four flights to the site, making the final hasty liftoff just as shouting soldiers burst from the jungle. He learned later the soldiers were not Japanese, but an Allied land rescue party.[3]

From the end of WWII through the Korean War and into the 1960s, in the Air Force and, indeed, the other services, special operations were rather step-child organizations. Soon after the 1960 election of President John F. Kennedy, things changed.

Through the 1950s, the Cold War and the possibility of a Soviet attack governed American military thinking and planning. Still, the Army and the Air Force maintained special forces that operated in a different sphere concerned with counterinsurgency and so-called "brush-fire wars." Kennedy showed his concern about that level of warfare by creating a sub-panel in his National Security Council called the Special Group (Counterinsurgency).

On October 12, 1961, the president visited Fort Bragg, N.C., home of Army special forces. During the visit, Brig. Gen. William P. Yarborough wore a green beret, which the president noticed and commented upon approvingly. Soon after, President Kennedy commented, "I'm sure that the green beret will be a mark of distinction in the trying times ahead."[4] From this point, all of the services progressed vigorously with their special forces (and distinctive head gear).

The Air Force created the Special Air Warfare Center (SAWC) at Hurlburt Field, Fla., in January 1962 and resurrected the unit designation of the First Air Commando Wing. Over the next few years, air commandos carried out operations in many countries using WWII aircraft. These activities proved to be excellent preparation for the Vietnam War. There was a tradition of working with indigenous people, speaking their language and working to strengthen their ability to resist insurgencies.[5]

During 1961 and 1962, the Combat Applications Group of SAWC evaluated the Douglas A-1E for its value in the special operations arena. The conclusion was that airplane later nicknamed the *Spad* was an ideal aircraft for counter-insurgency operations. By 1963, 150 *Spads* were in the process of overhaul and slight modification.[6]


Spads and CH-3 formation enroute to a Laotian destination. (USAF photo)

Bud Kerr at his office door. (Photo from the Bud Kerr collection)

By this time, also, helicopters were in production powered by turbine engines. Though designers had been working on helicopters since the 1930s, propulsion had relied primarily upon piston engines. When turbine engines began to show their potential, aircraft manufacturers moved quickly to jet power. The first production jet-powered helicopter was the Kaman K-225, in 1950.

By 1959, when Kerr reported to aviation cadet training, the Sikorsky UH-1 Iroquois was in production and helicopters were growing rapidly in size and capability. The prototype of the CH-3 first flew in 1963. Walter Boyne's observation was, "…for perhaps the only time in the history of rotary-wing aircraft, the right helicopters became available for the right war and thus provided a perfect combat storm" [7] Four years later, the 56th Air Commando Wing was activated on April 8, 1967, at NKP. Only 11 days later, Capt. Bud Kerr signed in at Shaw AFB to start flying the CH-3 with the 703rd Tactical Air Support Squadron (TASS).

Homesteaders

For several years after the end of the Korean War until the Vietnam War began to grow, Air Force personnel did not make frequent changes of station or from one airplane to another. A Strategic Air Command (SAC) aircrew member, for instance, might stay at Larson AFB, Wash., or March AFB, Calif., for several years. As American commitments to the Vietnam War increased, however, the homesteading pattern was broken up. The Air Force was running low in the pilot pool to send to Vietnam without requiring multiple tours. Thus, bomber pilots might find themselves flying a Cessna O-2 as a forward air controller (FAC) and navigators would go from a C-141 to a C-123 based in Vietnam. Such moves were both voluntary and otherwise. This was the environment into which Bud Kerr entered after joining the U.S. Air Force.

Early Service

Kerr's first contact with the Air Force was as a cadet member of the Pennsylvania Wing of the Civil Air Patrol (CAP), which he joined in 1954 at age 14. There, he rose to the rank of cadet colonel and helped develop the cadet staff and was cadet commander of the Hawk Mountain Ranger School.[8] The program trains cadets in search and rescue techniques and remains a national CAP cadet special activity.

By age 19, he was a freshman in engineering at Pennsylvania State University and a member of the Army Reserve Officer Training Corps. There, he capitalized upon his experiences with the Hawk Mountain program to replicate it within the Army ROTC. Kerr was appointed as the cadet commander of that program and two freshman classmates filled the other officer positions. The program was approved by Army ROTC headquarters and, over time, spread across the country.

But Kerr was not happy with college. Some research showed that he could get an Air Force commission via the Aviation Cadet Program.[9] Within a year, he could be a 19-year-old Air Force second lieutenant pilot or navigator, far more interesting than being a sophomore in engineering.

Once Kerr successfully completed a comprehensive physical and the Air Force Officer Qualification, for both pilot and navigator training, there was the choice of which path to choose. The decision was easy. He would have to wait 14 months for a pilot slot but could enter navigator school in three weeks.

In May 1959, after a year of college, Kerr reported to the 3611th Student Squadron at Harlingen AFB, Tex., for the aviation cadet navigator training program. He was nearly as far south as he could be in the continental United States. In the next year, he received military and navigator training and was ultimately commissioned and received navigator wings on May 20, 1960. During that year, Kerr rose to commander of the cadet corps and was a distinguished graduate.

During the 1950s and 1960s, SAC was where most navigators went for operational assignment. Kerr was one of those so directed. Before actually going to a bomber unit, the next step was the seven month Navigator Bombardier Upgrade Training with the 3535th Student Squadron at Mather AFB, California. There, Kerr learned the specifics of the B-52 navigation and bombing system.

Coming as he did from Pennsylvania, Kerr requested an assignment in the northeast United States. Little did he know

Sensors were small and could be hand-launched. (Photo from www.usafhpa.org/21stsos/21sthist.html)

The NKP flight line always had a huge variety of aircraft operating. (Photo from the Phil Carroll collection)

that the area included Loring AFB, Maine, within shouting distance of the Canadian border! As of February 1, 1961, he was assigned to the 70th Bomb Squadron equipped with the B-52G, 1,200 miles north of Harlingen. Prior to actually arriving at Loring, he had another 135 days on temporary duty at Castle AFB, Calif., for B-52 upgrade training. There, he flew many missions manned by student crew members to become familiar with SAC procedures in operating the B-52. Finally, he was basically qualified in the airplane.

He arrived at Loring on July 14, 1961, giving him time to prepare for the Maine winter. For the next three years in the 70th and a year with the 69th, Kerr flew the big bomber, ultimately qualifying as a radar navigator. Within a few months, he demonstrated proficiency of such high caliber that he received a spot promotion to first lieutenant. This was a SAC policy that recognized the demands upon crew members by promoting them earlier than the usual practice. The practice was canceled not soon after Kerr's jump in rank, thus resulting in a return to 2nd Lt.[10]

Kerr still wanted to become an Air Force pilot, a desire fulfilled in 1966, when his fourth application for Undergraduate Pilot Training (UPT) was approved. He left the chill of northern Maine and moved to Laredo AFB, Tex., to begin UPT on October 23, 1966. He was flying the Cessna T-37 trainer with the 3641st Student Squadron. Kerr's brother was by then an Army warrant officer flying helicopters in Vietnam. His brother was being shot at while he had seen no fire in six years in the Air Force so Kerr volunteered for helicopters.

He completed helicopter pilot training at Sheppard AFB, Tex., while assigned to the 3637th Student Squadron from October 23, 1966. The training began in the piston-engine powered Korean War-era Sikorsky H-19, which was "absolutely underpowered" in the West Texas heat. After three months, Kerr moved to the advanced course, flying Sikorsky HH-3s, "the most fun airplane he ever flew." By this time, the special operations helicopter forces in Southeast Asia were reaching maturity of equipment, tactics and doctrine.

After Sheppard, Kerr went to the brand new 703rd Tactical Air Support Squadron (TASS) at Shaw AFB, S.C., equipped with Sikorsky's CH-3. Arriving on April 19, 1967, he was the first person to sign in to the new unit. Another officer arrived soon after and the two functioned for some time as advance cadre for the 703rd. He was quickly caught up in checking out on the CH-3.

Over the next 17 months, Kerr became a highly qualified CH-3 pilot. The CH-3 was essentially the same as the HH-3 used in rescue except without a refueling boom. Much as in the B-52, he learned how to work with a crew, but flying tactical missions rather than high-altitude bombing missions. Soon after his arrival, the commander sent the two brand new pilots off to Sikorsky to pick up a new helicopter. Low time as they were, they were the most experienced pilots available. The pair did the Air Force acceptance profile at the Sikorsky factory then delivered the airplane to Shaw AFB. This was Kerr's first operational flight as a fully-qualified Air Force pilot.

For the first four months, the 703rd flew airlift missions carrying large containers holding tactical air control equipment. When the equipment was found not to be effective, that mission terminated and the squadron became the replacement training unit (RTU) for special operations pilots on their way to assignment with the 56th Air Commando Wing (ACW) at Nakhon Phanom, Thailand (NKP). Until early October 1968, Kerr worked to train pilots headed for NKP and the 21st Special Operations Squadron (SOS), known as the Dust Devils.

He also attended a special training course at Texas Instruments to learn about the sensors that the 21st was dropping all along the trails in Laos to detect enemy activity of various kinds. This was an activity of Task Force Alfa, part of the *Igloo White* operation. After the sensors were dropped, other aircraft would fly over the area to detect any signals denoting activity. With that information, air strikes could be more effectively accomplished. Because of the TI training and his other skills, Kerr was made the unit training officer.

Kerr was a welcome addition to the 21st (radio call sign *Knife*). He had flown with and trained nearly all of the assigned pilots. With the 21st, he soon showed that he was a dynamic,

On the ground, the CH-3 was a huge target but the crews did what they had to. (USAF photo)

skilled pilot and leader who demonstrated the utmost capability in combat.

Enroute to NKP, Kerr spent a week in September 1968 at Clark Air Base, Philippines. There, he went through the Pacific Air Forces Jungle Survival School, known to its alumni as *Snake School*. From Clark, it was a short flight to NKP in a Lockheed C-141. The assignment began on October 6, 1968, thrusting Kerr into a year of very exciting, challenging and dangerous missions in Laos and Vietnam.

NKP lay nine miles west of the center of the city of Nakhon Phanom at an elevation of 481 feet. The city was on the west bank of the Mekong River, with Thakek, Laos, just across the water. The 56th ACW was perhaps the largest wing in Southeast Asia. In addition to the 21st, there were in early 1968 the 1st, 22nd and 602nd SOS, flying Douglas A-1Es, the 609th SOS, equipped with the Douglas A-26K and other types, and the 608th SOS, equipped with C-123s and Helio U-10s. Operating closely with them was the 23rd TASS, flying Cessna O-2s. Their call sign was *Nail*. An interesting tenant unit was the Navy's VO-67, with Lockheed OP-2Es used to drop sensors. All told, a very busy base with a variety of aircraft.

The Pointy End of the Spear

From his arrival in October 1968 until about late January 1969, Kerr flew the sensor missions, part of the operational tasking under the *Igloo White* project. The helicopters had a special rack on the aft ramp. The CH-3 would fly over enemy territory and drop sensors resembling small rockets into the trees. The microphones detected sounds ranging from truck movement to people talking and other data. The sounds were picked up at first by Lockheed EC-121Bs and later by Beech QU-22s (modified Bonanzas). These aircraft provided relay to transfer the sensor results to an analysis facility at NKP.

In early 1969, the 21st lost the sensor drop mission to a U.S. Marine Corps unit at Quang Tri, in the northern part of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). These operations placed the CH-3s too low and slow for safety. Because Kerr was the system expert, he flew to Quang Tri for a few days to train the Marines. Once the training was complete, he returned to NKP to become involved with the squadron's new mission under the operation name of *Prairie Fire*. This was a top secret project managed by *Heavy Hook*, an NKP detachment of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam - Studies and Observations Group (MACVSOG). The program came directly under the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Under *Prairie Fire*, the 21st's new tasking was to insert and recover long-range reconnaissance teams (LRT) conducting cross-border intelligence gathering patrols and other activities behind enemy lines. The teams consisted of several indigenous personnel commanded by an American officer, to ensure accurate, reliable intelligence.[11]

Mission Profile

The new mission proved to be challenging and exceptionally hazardous to the 21st. Col. Robert Arnau compiled a thorough narrative of the 21st SOS mission profile during his service at NKP, from March 1969 to February 1970.

Helicopters of the 21st SOS dropped LRTs at very small, remote landing zones (LZ) in rugged karst areas near what was known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The LZs had been chosen by *Heavy Hook* personnel riding with 23rd TASS FACs, call sign *Nail*. Their photos and the observations were essential

The way out as seen by the Long-Range reconnaissance teams. (USAF photo)

to enabling the *Knife* pilots to determine if they could fly low enough at the LZ to hover in ground effect.[12]

Flight operations in Southeast Asia faced serious challenges of terrain, dense forests and weather. The terrain was very rugged, with steep cliffs and karsts, all clothed with tall trees and bushes. There were cleared areas used for cultivation but they might have deceptively tall foliage.

Operating over this terrain was further complicated by the weather. Temperatures were quite warm throughout the year and highest from March through June, ranging in the day time from 32 C to 35C. At night, when the 21st frequently operated, temperatures were 22C to 25C. Consequently, the helicopters were operating at density altitudes ranging from 1,000 ft. higher than pressure altitude at night to 3,500 ft. in day time. The result was severe performance limitations.

On top of this was the rainy season, from May through September. Average rainfall was 10 to 23 inches with 10 to 22 days of rain per month. It was not unusual to see water two inches deep pouring from a corrugated roof! Flying in such heavy rain with associated turbulence was extremely hazardous.

Typically, the formation included three CH-3s and four *Spads* flying to the area of the LZ, where they would meet a *Nail* FAC with a *Heavy Hook* operator aboard. The lead helicopter, *Knife 51*, was the air mission commander, who was transporting or would pick up the LRT. The other two helicopters, *Knife 52* and *53*, remained high while *51* went to the LZ.

The rationale for three helicopters was simple. At their high density altitude, they were usually able to just hover out of ground effect. If *Knife 51* went down with 10 people (the crew and the LRT) aboard, two more helicopters were necessary to rescue them. Meanwhile, the *Spads* provided fire suppression around the LZ and even more fire power could be called in.

The jungle penetrator ride could seem endless. (U.S. Army photo)

After the team was landed, the aircraft departed the LZ as quickly as possible. Helicopter operations were extremely noisy so any enemy within miles could hear the operation. The basic plan called for extraction at another LZ a few days later. In most cases, extractions were emergency operations to extract the LRT from wherever they ended up.

The LRT had probably been in a running fire fight through the night. The *Knife* flight launched in early morning and flew to the pick-up point, where a *Nail* FAC with a *Heavy Hook* rider was directing protective air strikes around the LRT. Upon *Knife's* arrival, *Nail* would lead the formation near to the team, who would pop a colored smoke grenade for positive identification.

If there was a clear space, the helicopter would land as close as terrain and enemy activity permitted to take the LRT aboard. More often, the helicopter had to hover much higher near the tree tops and use the jungle penetrator to hoist personnel up through the trees. This was a device with three seats that flipped down. The persons to be recovered would sit on a seat and put a safety belt around their body. A flight engineer/gunner would lean out the door and talk the pilot into position, then lower the penetrator--all while under enemy fire! The helicopter was a huge target for the enemy, with at least one gunner exposed to ground fire while operating the hoist. At least three cycles with the jungle penetrator were needed to extract a six-man team and its equipment.[13]

Kerr's War

Kerr flew many such missions, as did every other crew member in the 21st. At least four of his missions were of such a level of challenge and hazard that he was decorated for his performance.

In Kerr's opinion, the LRTs had "the toughest mission that the military has ever had." They usually had an Army lieutenant and five indigenous personnel, who might be Burmese, Vietnamese, Chinese or Laotians. All wore North Vietnamese Army uniforms and carried AK-47 automatic rifles. The teams arrived at NKP aboard "black" C-130s from Nha Trang, Vietnam

They operated mostly in Laos but also went north into Vietnam and south into Cambodia. In addition to intelligence gathering, the teams went after political and military leaders and conducted sabotage. In the time he was there, Kerr thought only a few Army officers survived and perhaps 10% of team members came out seriously wounded. "For every six-man team I put in, I only pulled out three. They almost always got caught."

The extraction missions were very hazardous to both the team members and to the 21st aircraft and crews. Many were at night and weather was often a complication. Some extractions involved many aircraft. If necessary, additional aircraft including jet fighters were called in to provide extended suppression of enemy fire. A designated mission commander (MC) had absolute control of and responsibility for the

operation, no matter his rank. Kerr, a captain, often was MC for formations where majors and above were flying other airplanes.

First Silver Star Mission

During the last eight months of his time at NKP, Captain Kerr flew several missions that garnered him two Silver Stars and two Distinguished Flying Crosses. His total performance as unit training officer was also recognized with a Bronze Star. The following missions are examples of the conditions that Kerr and all 21st SOS crew members operated under.

On the afternoon of March 20, 1969, Kerr led a six-ship formation to rescue an LRT engaged in combat with enemy forces in the Cam Lo Valley, an extension of the demilitarized zone between the two Vietnams. The rest of the crew were copilot Maj. Robert D. Reid, and flight engineers/gunners SSgt's. Lawrence M. Dreyer and Bruce A. Smith. The formation included two more helicopters and three *Spads*. Enroute weather was heavy with lots of turbulence, which would normally have cancelled the mission. There were many known enemy gun emplacements along the way. Reid's precise navigation got them to the extraction point about sundown. There, the FAC briefed them on the situation and then had to depart, due to low fuel.

The LRT team was still taking fire in all quadrants from heavy automatic weapons and could not have survived overnight. Kerr and his crew elected to attempt a rescue. He dropped his external tanks to minimize fire hazard and made a high speed low level approach to the hill top where the team was located. Dreyer and Smith stood unprotected in the doorways while firing upon the enemy.

As Kerr approached, some 200 to 250 NVA troops charged from a nearby tree line. The gunner directed mini-gun fire at 4,000 rounds per minute, killing men right and left. Kerr could not understand why the enemy commander made such a charge in the face of heavy fire, except that he was intent upon killing the remaining LRT members. At about 300 feet above the terrain, he told the escorting *Spads* to make firing passes along the tree line to cut down on enemy fire.

The first attempt had to be abandoned because of heavy fire and difficulty locating the team. On the second attempt, the team popped a smoke grenade, making positive identification possible. Kerr's aircraft dumped fuel and made another high speed approach while employing evasive maneuvers against heavy ground fire.

Kerr set up a hover near the tree line on the hill side, just below enemy fire passing over the helicopter. Most of the team broke from the trees toward the helicopter while the team leader held back to provide covering fire against enemy troops only 30 meters away from him. Finally, with more suppressive fire from Dreyer and Smith, the team leader ran for the helicopter and got aboard. Kerr then made a low altitude high speed takeoff to rejoin the formation, which then was fired upon heavily. The remaining helicopters dropped their external tanks and returned fire. Without the external tanks, all aircraft were short of fuel, necessitating recovery at a friendly forward base to refuel and assess battle damage. Kerr's formation then returned to NKP to deliver the rescued LRT.

For this mission, Kerr was awarded his first Silver Star. He had already received the first of two Distinguished Flying Crosses for a mission on February 7. That was an insertion of an indigenous LRT well into enemy territory while under heavy hostile fire. He then had to return to extract the team, leaving his aircraft with minimum fuel when he finally regained safety.

The Mission That Never Happened

One other mission was a particular challenge to Kerr because of command issues. In late April, Kerr flew a rescue mission that caused him to be temporarily downgraded from aircraft commander and instructor pilot to copilot.

At 3:00 a.m., Kerr and crew were flying a night patrol around NKP when they heard the pilot of a damaged *Spad* who was trying to return to the base. The pilot, a major from the 1st Air Commando Squadron, finally had to bail out of the stricken fighter about 10 miles inside enemy-controlled territory. During his descent under a parachute, he was twice drawn through the fireball of the crashed aircraft, resulting in severely burned legs. Kerr and his crew decided to launch a rescue mission without specific authorization.

Returning to NKP, the crew broke into the arms locker and procured four flares and two M60 machine guns. Enroute to the major's location, they learned that enemy forces were closing in. Capture in Laos meant death! About 30 miles into Laos, the command post ordered Kerr to return to base. His response was that they were continuing their mission. Command post then directed that, once in the area, Kerr monitor the situation until first light, when a search and rescue task force could then make the rescue. But the major stated that he was taking heavy fire and feared capture.

Kerr told him that they were on the way! When in the crash area, Kerr's crew doused all aircraft lighting, dropped illumination flares from about 3,500 feet and dove for the ground. About 200 feet above the ground, the flares burned out, leaving the helicopter in a black hole. It was a hard landing in the sudden darkness while under enemy fire. Once on the ground, a search light helped the downed pilot get to the chopper's door. The door gunners kept up suppressive gun fire while the major broke for the helicopter. This was a situation where the enemy could see the helicopter but the crew was looking into blackness. Once the major was aboard, Kerr "got out of there, fast!" Their flight landed at NKP close to day break, about 6:00 a.m., and "everyone was there to meet us." The wing and squadron commanders wanted to debrief Kerr immediately. His response, "I'm going to bed!"

Later that day, the squadron commander, Lt. Col. Harold Welch, told Kerr to never do that again. Kerr's response was that he could not let "one of our own" be killed or captured in Laos. In the same circumstances he would do it again! Welch then mentioned an award recommendation, but Kerr told him what he could do with the medal! At that point, he was downgraded to copilot, but the change lasted only 16 hours.

That evening, the major and several squadron mates visited Kerr in his quarters to give him a half-gallon of Johnny Walker Black Label. Kerr said that he had a hard time buying his own drinks in the club for the remainder of his time at NKP. Years

later, Kerr and his wife unexpectedly met the major at the McGuire AFB officers club. Once again, the major told him that he owed his life to Kerr.

Kerr certainly recognized the degree to which he had allowed the mixed imperatives of the situation to lead to unsanctioned actions. He placed not only himself but the squadron commander in a perilous situation in terms of discipline and management. This stood against Kerr's conviction that he could not let an American pilot die. But, he also prevented the rest of the crew from receiving a decoration.

The Second DFC

An extraction on June 27 continued the pattern of Kerr's missions (and those of the 21st, in general). Operating near the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Vietnam, Kerr was mission commander of a nine-ship formation tasked to pick up a LRT. The team was deep in enemy territory and engaged in combat. Very marginal weather added to the mission's difficulty and limited air cover. Kerr and his crew disregarded ground fire and landed long enough to board the team. Then, it was time to "get out of Dodge."

Another Silver Star

An extraction mission on August 18 was every bit as dangerous and challenging as the March event. There were only three surviving members of a long-range team who needed extraction. They were surrounded by what Kerr estimated as a company and a half of Pathet Lao soldiers. Kerr headed a multi-aircraft formation that included CH-3s and *Spads*. While other CH-3s and the *Spads* laid down suppressive fire with guns and napalm, he moved in to make the pick-up.

Dropping out of the formation, Kerr landed on the steep hill side at about 3,500 ft. elevation. It should be noted that many extractions were from the top of a hill or from a ridge close to such a high point. That kept the friendly personnel above their opposition and out of plunging fire. But the heat and humidity in those situations seriously degraded helicopter flight operations

Once Kerr was on the ground, the three survivors made their break toward the helicopter. They were all that remained of the original team. Hot on their heels were possibly as many as 300 Pathet Lao soldiers, all firing at the helicopter.

Later inspection showed 49 bullet holes in the helicopter but none in vital locations or the crew. The three team members boarded the helicopter, but one was killed in the doorway. Kerr said that the Pathet Lao forces were the worst ground fire threat he saw on any of his extraction missions. His door gunners returned fire with their mini-guns, killing dozens of the attackers.

The pilots in 21st helicopters often wore one-inch thick titanium body vests that went around and under their bodies. Once, Kerr was hit by a bullet that came in his side window and bounced across his armor before exiting the other side. Happily, the result was only a bruised chest. The door gunners did not have such protection!

The view if wounded were to be extracted. (Photo from the Bob Savage collection)

Shoot or Don't Shoot

Sometimes, the mission commander had to make a quick judgment call that could have led to serious consequences, no matter what he decided. Kerr faced such a dilemma on another pick-up mission that did not appear to be hot. About 90 minutes into the flight, the team that they were to extract had disengaged from the enemy and did not want to come out that day.

Kerr turned his formation and headed for Udorn RTAFB, which was a closer fuel stop. The formation included three helicopters, four fighters and three *Spads*. Flying at 4,000 ft., they passed over a Laotian village that Kerr knew well and was usually safe. This time, the formation took fire from 37mm antiaircraft guns that had apparently been moved in during the night.

The lead *Spad* said, "Permission to return fire!" Kerr's immediate response was, "Permission denied, scatter!" The *Spads* carried napalm and an attack might have killed many of 2,500 innocent villagers.

Kerr's squadron and wing commanders pointed out the issue Kerr faced. If he had returned fire, there would have been huge casualties among the innocent villagers. If he lost an airplane without having returned fire, he could have been court-martialed for "Cowardice in the face of the enemy." Only a one-second decision separated those possibilities.

Ad Hoc Rescues

The LRT support missions continued for several years after Kerr moved on. Although search and rescue (SAR) was not a designated mission of the 21st SOS, the squadron flew SAR when circumstances called for it. Their equipment and techniques for inserting or recovering LRTs were much the same as that of the HH-3 rescue helicopters. In November 1972, those skills rescued a B-52 crew near NKP after it was hit by a surface-to-air missile over North Vietnam.

The B-52, call sign *Fang 79*, managed to get as far as Laos before the crew was forced to eject. The radar navigator was Maj. Bob Estes, the author's classmate in navigation school in

1963-1964. The crew had time to radio its plight to friendly forces and a 21st SOS CH-3, *Knife 30*, and an H-43 Pedro from NKP were on scene when the bomber crew came to earth. Estes' account of evens follows.

"On November 22, 1972, it was *Knife 30* that rescued me and three other members of my B-52 aircrew from a forest near NKP. I was very happy to see them, although my first view of the CH-3 was when my parachute descent broke through a low cloud deck and I saw the helicopter hovering right below me. My first thought was that if I fouled the rotor blades, they would not be happy with me. I was lucky in that 1) the helicopter was not as near as it first appeared, and 2) I had long ago made the famous "four line cut" to my parachute shroud lines and was able to steer the chute away from the CH-3 to a less-than-graceful PLF some 100 meters away.

When the *Knife* crew came over to pick me up, they treated me to one of those long rides on the jungle penetrator. My ride included oscillations that bounced me off a couple of tree trunks before reaching the hatch and being hoisted in and dumped on the deck by the door gunner. The first sight that greeted me there was staring up into the barrels of the 7.62 mini-gun mounted just inside the door. The gun was in the stowed position as apparently the *Knife* crew did not consider a gaggle of 'SAC trained killers' to be much of a threat. The Pedro helicopter picked up the other two crew members, which made for a clean sweep of some very happy (and lucky) guys.

Back at NKP, the *Knife* crew told us that they had just completed an LRT, so the type of missions that Col. Kerr flew were still ongoing at that stage of the war."[14]

Kerr's missions not unique!

None of Captain Kerr's missions were unusual among those flown by the 21st. The squadron flew such challenging flights across a broad area of southern Laos and into neighboring areas of North and South Vietnam, Cambodia and 175 miles north to the Plain of Jars. In fact, all aircraft of the 56th Wing flew special operations missions across a huge area of Southeast Asia. The cost of the missions is shown by the losses of some 26 wing aircraft between mid-December 1968 and mid-January 1969, about 26% of assigned aircraft.

Non-Combat Flying

Most, if not all, units assigned to Thai bases carried out some sort of community service activities. These were usually done under the surveillance of the civil affairs officers on base. They were opportunities for unit personnel to get involved with a local Thai community or activity and do something that improved their life and satisfied unit personnel that they were doing something other than shooting and killing.

For the 21st, the helicopters were excellent tools to perform such missions. The aircraft would be loaded with special personnel and equipment and fly out to a nearby village in Thailand or across the river in Laos. There, they would work with the local village leader to carry out a project to help them.

On one occasion, Kerr loaded the helicopter with doctors, dentists and civil engineer specialists and flew to a village where the inhabitants had to walk two miles to get water. While the doctors and dentists were treating those in need, the engineers put in a well. This all took about seven hours.

After the work was done, Kerr's Thai-speaking gunner, Al Peranny, told Kerr that the village chief wanted to talk to him. With the chief was a trio of "really good-looking young girls." Peranny said that the chief really appreciated what had been done for the village. So, Kerr could have one of the girls. Kerr said, "I can't do that. There is no way I could explain to my wife." Though Peranny said Kerr "really had to do this," Kerr said, "I really DON'T have to do this."

After NKP

During the year at NKP, Kerr flew some 180 missions for a total of 700 to 800 hours, of which about 80% were combat and the remainder combat support. In addition to two Silver Stars and two DFCs, he garnered several Air Medals and a Bronze Star that recognized the totality of his performance at NKP.

For the follow-on assignment, Air Force personnel told him that he was going to Randolph AFB, Tex., for four or five months to check out in Northrop T-38s, in anticipation of a fixed-wing assignment. Kerr requested a year at Shaw AFB instead, so that he could have some time with his family. Then, he went to Randolph for the T-38 upgrade, followed by an assignment to the 30th Military Airlift Squadron and the Lockheed C-141 at McGuire AFB, New Jersey. That put him close to his family in Pennsylvania.

Over the next few years, then-Capt. Bud Kerr made steady professional progress and promotion. In addition to his skills as a pilot, his close relationships with friends in Air Force and Military Airlift Command personnel enabled him to progress upward in both rank and assignment.

While still in the cockpit with the 30th, Kerr again demonstrated his ability to rise to critical challenges and save lives and equipment. The event was what he called his most spectacular landing, ever!

He was on an airlift mission to Southeast Asia, getting what was called a line check in the C-141. The copilot was Lars Lindenhall. They launched from Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, at about midnight, departing northeast across the island. At 1,500 ft., the gear was in the process of retracting when number three "just exploded!" Turning immediately downwind, Kerr told Lindenhall, "Give it fire bottle number one, Lars." After 30 seconds, with no apparent effect, he called for fire bottle number two. Still no effect and the whole wing was on fire. They turned southwest on downwind and crossed the island out over the water.

Kerr called Kadena tower, explaining the problem. The response was, "MAC, the field is zero-zero and the field is closed. With the cockpit brightly lit by the fire, Kerr said, "I'm going to blow up unless I get on the ground. I'm coming in."

Kerr told Kadena, "I'll fly an ILS (instrument landing system) approach to 06 (which was an approach over water from the southwest to the runway end a half mile from the water). Have the GCA (ground controlled approach) monitor me and have him talk to me, too, while I'm flying the ILS." Kadena agreed. As Kerr flew the pattern, GCA advised him, "You're a little high on glide slope. You're a little low, etc."

He saw one strobe light before he touched down to roll out to a stop. There, the foam trucks sprayed the wing fire and extinguished the flames.

The Final Years

The next years of Kerr's career saw him take on more and more responsibility. From McGuire, Kerr moved to Headquarters, Military Airlift Command (MAC), Scott AFB, Illinois. Beginning as an aircrew assignment manager, he ultimately progressed to Chief of Aircrew Assignments. Arriving in 1973, he departed in 1977 as a lieutenant colonel enroute to the Air War College (AWC) at Maxwell AFB, Alabama. AWC is the highest level of Air Force professional military training and often is the stepping stone to a major command.

For Kerr, by then a senior lieutenant colonel, that was to command the 603rd Military Airlift Support Squadron, later upgraded to a group, at Kadena AB. As the senior airlift commander at Kadena, he was responsible for management of airlift at Kadena and much of the western Pacific. Subsequently, Kerr re-qualified in the C-141 and was assigned to the 62nd Military Airlift Wing at McChord AFB, Washington. There, he was the wing safety officer for a year before taking command of the 62nd Avionics Squadron, where he was promoted to full colonel.

Colonel Bud Kerr finally retired from active duty on January 31, 1986, with 25 years and seven months of Air Force service. Beginning as a 20-year old B-52 navigator, he went on to pilot school. As a pilot, he flew special operations helicopters in combat and the C-141 jet transport. Personal determination and outstanding performance took a 19-year-old aviation cadet without a college degree to the rank of colonel with important staff assignments and command of Air Force units. ✈

End Notes

Except as specifically noted, most of the material regarding Joseph W. Kerr's experiences is based upon a two-hour interview in March 2016 and review of many of Kerr's military documents and award citations.

1. Dorr, Robert F. "Air Force Special Operations History: A Rich Legacy." http://www.defensemedianetwork.com/stories/history-of-air-force-special-operations-a-rich-legacy. DefenseMediaNetwork. August 19, 2016. 2. Pagination as printed out from the internet.
2. Dorr.
3. "Air Rescue Service." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Air_Rescue_Service.
4. Prados, John. "What is the History of the Green Berets?" https://blog.oup.com/2015/us-special-forces-history. May 2, 2015.
5. Zaiman, Robert. "Air Commandos TAC-Style." *Flying Review International*, Vol.19 No. 1. October 1963, 19-20.
6. Zaiman. 21.
7. Boyne, Walter J. *How_the Helicopter Changed Modern Warfare*. Pelican Publishing Company: Gretna, Louisiana, 2011. 105.
8. In 1956, Pennsylvania CAP Wing Commander Col. Philip Neuweller founded the Hawk Mountain Ranger School to train search and rescue personnel in the wing. In the 1960s, CAP cadets began to staff the Hawk Mountain program, which remains a CAP national program. Other CAP wings developed similar programs and are part of the CAP National Emergency Assistance Training schools. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hawk_Mountain_Ranger_School.
9. The Aviation Cadet program was the oldest of several Air Force officer commissioning programs. Others were the USAF Academy, AFROTC, Officer Training School and Officer Candidate School. Dating to WWI, it produced pilots, navigators and other specialized officers. A brief hiatus in the program came in the postwar reduction in force. In 1948, the aviation cadet program was revived and continued until the Air Force decided that all officers must have college degrees, after the Air Force Academy was opened in 1955. Aviation cadet pilot training was ended in 1961 and for navigators, the last graduate was in 1965. See Ashcroft, Dr. Bruce. *We Wanted Wings: A History of the Aviation Cadet Program.* Lackland AFB, Texas: HQAETC Office of History and Research. 2005. Pg iii, 1-2.
10. In 1949, Gen. Curtis LeMay petitioned the Air Force to allow spot promotions in Strategic Air Command for deserving aircrew members. The promotion would be good as long as the crew member continued excellent performance. Spot promotions continued until June 1960. The practice was always something that SAC tanker crews and Navy ICBM personnel objected to.
11. Turkoly-Joczik, Lt. Col. Robert L. SOG: An Overview. http://www.macvsog.cc/sog,_an_overview.htm. 2/8.
12. Arnau, Robert. "Knife Tales." usafhpa.org/experiences/knifetales/21stknifetales.html. The high power requirement needed to hover out of ground effect is reduced when operating in ground effect. Ground effect is a condition of improved performance encountered when operating near (within 1/2 rotor diameter or 31' for the CH-3) of the ground. It is due to the interference of the surface with the airflow pattern of the rotor system, and it is more pronounced the nearer the ground is approached. Increased blade efficiency while operating in ground effect is due to two separate and distinct phenomena. First and most important is the reduction of the velocity of the induced airflow. Since the ground interrupts the airflow under the helicopter, the entire flow is altered. This reduces downward velocity of the induced flow. The result is less induced drag and a more vertical lift vector. The lift needed to sustain a hover can be produced with a reduced angle of attack and less power because of the more vertical lift vector.
13. Arnau.
14. Estes, Maj. Robert L. Email, April 17, 2016.