



Today in SEA History

29 March 1972



USAF photo, courtesy of Bob Woods
AC-130 FE and moderator of the Spectre E-mail group

Today, we remember and honor the crew of AC-130A, serial number 55-0044, *Prometheus*, call sign Spectre 13, lost in battle over the HCM trail in the southern area of Laos known as “Steel Tiger” Wednesday night, 29 March 1972.

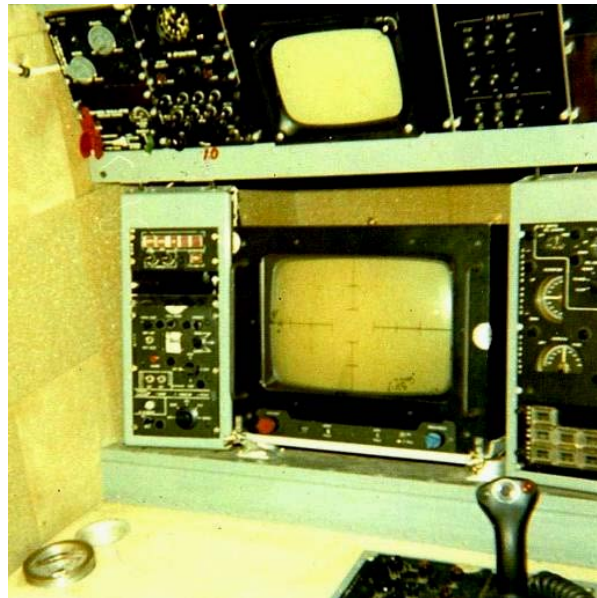


AC-130A, s.n. 55-0044, *Prometheus*

Credit: Tom Combs, crew chief

Maj Irving B. Ramsower II, aircraft commander; Capt Curtis D. Miller, pilot; 1st Lt Charles J. Wanzel III, pilot; Maj Henry P. Brauner, navigator; **Capt Richard Castillo, infrared sensor operator**; Maj Howard D. Stephenson, electronic warfare officer; Capt Barclay B. Young, fire control officer; Capt Richard C. Halpin, low light TV senior operator; SSgt. James K. Caniford, illuminator operator; SSgt Merlyn Paulson, flight engineer; SSgt Edward D. Smith, Jr., aerial gunner; SSgt Edwin Pearce, aerial gunner; A1C William A. Todd, aerial gunner and A1C Robert E. Simmons, aerial gunner.

FYI: I've highlighted the name of **Capt Dick Castillo**, a friend and rated officer who I served with early in my enlisted career at Randolph AFB, flying with the 3300 Support Squadron, T-39A Sabreliner airlift missions in support of the HQ ATC Command Briefing Team.



AC-130A FLIR Crew Position
Typical of Capt Dick Castillo's work station

Credit: Ron Girard and the Spectre Association

Here are some notes from Castillo's shootdown:

Gunship *Prometheus* departed Ubon RTAFB on the evening of Tuesday, 28 March 1972 to perform an armed reconnaissance mission (with an F-4D fighter escort) interdicting North Vietnamese supplies moving south along the Ho Chi Minh trail into South Vietnam.

When they taxied out of the 16th SOS revetment at Ubon, SSgt Tom Combs (crew chief of 55-0044) was the last person to see the crew of

Prometheus ...as they would never return from this final combat mission. Tom Combs vividly recalls after marshalling the aircraft "Smitty" (SSgt Edward D. Smith Jr) waving and giving Combs 'the finger' as they started their final takeoff roll.



SSgt Tom Combs, crew chief: AC-130A s.n. 55-0044

Credit: Tom Combs

The shootdown occurred in the early morning of Wednesday, 29 March 1972 (the day before the outbreak of the 1972 Eastertide Offensive).

Wednesday, 29 March 1972 would also be the last day of Operation "Commando Hunt VII", the on-going interdiction campaign along the HCM trail in Laos that had begun on 1 Nov 1971.

At 0300 hours, the F-4D escort aircrew observed an SA-2 surface to air missile (SAM) liftoff from the ground in the area of the Tchepone LOC. Before the gunship could take evasive action, the SAM exploded, mortally wounding Specter 13. A few seconds later the AC-130A impacted the ground on the east side of a jungle covered mountain, followed by secondary explosions.

Prometheus was shotdown (coordinates: North 16.3900 / East 106.0600) in Savannakhet Province, 21 miles southwest of Tchepone, 12 miles south of Ban Namm, 56 miles east of Savannakhet, and 32 miles west of the Lao/Vietnamese border, 45 miles due west of Khe Sanh, RVN.



As one of the F-4D escort aircraft flew low over the burning wreckage, the crew was unable to see any sign of survivors. However, several minutes later as he was departing the area, the F-4 heard multiple emergency 'beepers'.

Another AC-130A gunship operating nearby, call sign "Spectre 10" and his F-4 escort also heard the beeper signals. In the darkness, no parachutes were seen and no voice contact was established with any of the downed aircrew.

At 0350 hrs, a Nail FAC arrived as on-scene commander for the SAR effort.

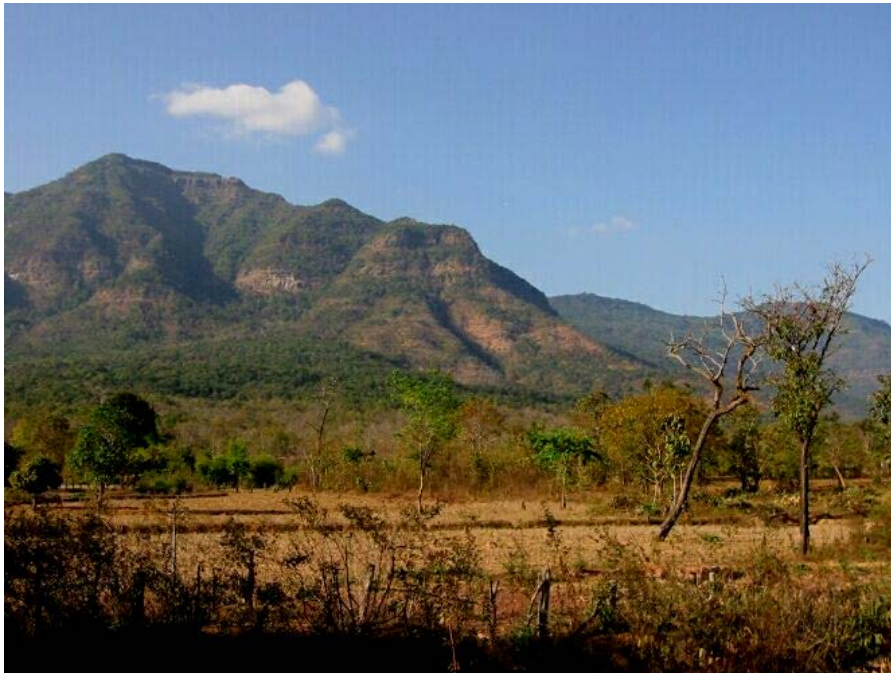
The SAR effort for Spectre 13 was terminated at 1830 hours on Thursday, 30 March 1972 (6 ½ hours into the 1972 Easter Offensive).

FYI: 7th Air Force priorities had shifted to the east, where 30,000 PAVN troops, reinforced by tanks, artillery, and massive anti-air defenses were pouring across the DMZ and out of the Laotian jungle east of Tchepone (Spectre 13's AOR) attacking the northern most concentric arch of ARVN fire support bases in MR-I.

Operation "Commando Hunt VII", the on-going interdiction campaign along the HCM trail in Laos, had become irrelevant. The enemy had arrived in-force, supported by massive quantities of logistics prepositioned along the borders of MR-I, II and III.

The Easter Offensive of 1972 started at 1200 hrs (local) on Thursday, 30 March 1972 when the North Vietnamese invaded MR-I, under weather conditions that favored them and greatly hindered USAF/USN and VNAF counter air strikes.

FYI: The presence of SA-2 SAMs in the “Steel Tiger” area of southern Laos caused HQ 7th AF/DO to close the "Amber" airway for about a week. This pushed our Scatback Bravo T-39 courier flight planning from over-flying the Bolovens Plateau of “Steel Tiger” further south to the area of northern Cambodia airspace.



Bolovens Plateau



“Amber Airway” over the Bolovens Plateau

Map used with permission of Lt Col Byron Hukee, A-1 Skyraider Association

The "Amber" airway was located approximately 60 miles to the south of Tchepone, on a diagonal line between Ubon, Thailand and Da Nang, RVN. Scatback typically flew the "Amber" airway (Ubon TACAN Chl 93, 075° radial) northeast from Ubon RTAFB to Da Nang AB, RVN @ FL240.

I then saw Maj Max Brestel shortly after the Spectre 13 shootdown (probably on Thursday, 30 March 1972). Brestel had taxied his Nail OV-10A up to TSN Base Ops, spot 1 (across from our Scatback open revetments).



Tan Son Nhut Base Operations

(Photo Credits: Sgt Dale Baker)



Scatback T-39A Open Revetments Across from TSN Base Ops

I walked over and said hi to Maj Brestel, as he unstrapped from his OV-10A Bronco.

When he got out of his aircraft, Brestel tossed his life support gear into the cockpit and said he was in a hurry to debrief 7th AF/CV (Maj Gen Winton W. "Bones" Marshall) <http://www.af.mil/bios/bio.asp?bioID=6309>, so we didn't have much time to chat.

I had heard we had lost an AC-130 over in Laos; however, this was the first time that I learned that Capt Dick Castillo was aboard the ill-fated Spectre 13. I think Brestel just briefly said: *"Bob, Dick Castillo is dead."*

I remember this event well, in front of TSN Base Ops; the shock of losing our friend, Dick Castillo.

This was also the last time I saw Max Brestel, until Dick Castillo's funeral services in October 1986.

Joint Task Force - Full Accounting recovered the remains of Dick Castillo in Laos, on 1 March 1986; and identified his remains on 23 October 1986. The June 1987 National Geographic Magazine featured a photo documentary article about the recovery of Spectre 13's crew, including a picture of Dick Castillo's corroded "Dog Tag" recovered from the crash site in the southern Laotian jungle. Sgt Jim Foanio, call sign "Lion 120", Det 3, 621st Tactical Control Squadron @ Ubon during this shootdown has provided a copy of the National Geographic article on *Prometheus* (attached).

Lt Col Dick Castillo was buried at Ft Sam Houston National Cemetery on Wednesday, 29 October 1986.

Col (Ret) Bill Johnstone, HQ ATC Chief of Staff-*emeritus*, Lt Col (Ret.) Max Brestel and CMSgt Bob Laymon stood side-by-side at Castillo's graveside services, saluted and remembered our fallen friend, companion and fellow aircrew member.

From the Ft Sam National Cemetery database: Castillo, Richard, b. 11/21/1938, d. 06/19/1979, Res: Corpus Christi, TX, Plot: AI 0 613, bur. 10/29/1986

From The Vietnam Wall, Washington DC: CASTILLO RICHARD LTC AIR FORCE CORPUS CHRISTI TX declared KIA on 19 JUN 79 LAOS 21 NOV 38 HOSTILE, DIED-MISSING

In memory and spirit.



Then-Capt Dick Castillo

Godspeed Dick Castillo,

Scatback Scribe

Bob Laymon, CMSgt, USAF (Ret)

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Post Script:

In the days and weeks leading up to the 29 March loss of Spectre 13, I had been “bugging” the 7th Air Force/ADO to allow me to fly as an observer on a live-fire AC-130 mission over the HCM trail. I had stated my interest in making the Air Force a career and would jump at the opportunity to fly on a Spectre combat mission. *Young, brash and unafraid ...for now.*

Brig Gen Richard G. Cross was the assistant deputy chief of staff, operations, Seventh Air Force, a frequent GO guest pilot in our Scatback T-39s and became the ‘action officer’ working my gunship ride request.

<http://www.af.mil/bios/bio.asp?bioID=5121>

Sidebar: Despite his last name and his imposing presence, Gen Cross ...was anything but cross.

On our first Scatback flight together, Gen Cross raised our T-39 landing gear handle on takeoff, turned to me sitting on my crew chief’s/potty seat and said: *“Hey chief, can I have a glass of ice water?” YES SIR! I replied.*

Next takeoff, same thing when the gear handle went up: *“Hey chief, can I have a glass of ice water?” YES SIR!*

Third flight: (I’m no dummy ...this looks like a trend!) Gear handle goes up *(and right out of a scene from MASH with Cross as Lt Col Henry Blake and me as Cpl “Radar” O’Reilly)* Gen Cross turns to his right in our T-39’s pilot seat and bumps into my outstretched arm, holding the anticipated glass of ice water in my hand.

Cross merely smiled and communicated through eye-contact *“I get it, chief.”*

From that point forward, Gen Cross never asked me again for his ice water on takeoff. He merely raised the landing gear handle, and then held out his open hand for the obligatory glass of ice water!

I really liked and admired Gen Cross.

I checked in with Gen Cross (a.k.a. “bugged him”) several more times about my request to fly with the 16th SOS Spectre boys. Cross said my request was moving along through 7th/13th AF channels and he would be sure to get back to me when he heard if I was going to flying on their gunship mission.

Well, we lost Spectre 13, then Spectre 22 in quick succession. Spectre 22 was shotdown the next day on Thursday, 30 March 1972, near Saravane, Laos below our “Amber” airway. The AC-130E pilot retained control of s.n. 69-6571 until all 15 crewmembers could bail out over uncontested Laotian territory. All survived and were rescued.

http://www.jollygreen.org/Stories/DavidPreston/loss_of_specter_22.htm

I dropped the idea of flying as a guest observer on a live-fire Spectre gunship mission over the HCM trail. Gen Cross never brought the subject up again ...either.

Things were about to get very busy in 7th Air Force and throughout Southeast Asia.

Wednesday, 29 March 1972: HQ 7th AF/IG team completed their inspection of the 377th Air Base Wing functions at Tan Son Nhut AB, RVN. Brig Gen Pete DeLonga, 7th AF/LG {husband of Mrs. Jo DeLonga, HQ AETC/PA} had sent a 'Staff Assistance Team' to "help" Scatback Mx {377th CAMS} get a little bit better at what we do. *"Glad to be here. We are here to help."* The inspection was accomplished over a two week period, Wednesday, 15 March through Wednesday, 29 March 1972.



AF Art: Ken Chandler

The Veteran ...on whose shoulders today's warrior stands

ROE:

Today in SEA History is a product of retired Chief Master Sergeant Bob Laymon.

The purpose of this series is historical research and education to preserve the heritage of our SEA warriors.

The opinions expressed herein are CMSgt Laymon's alone.

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