

The Earthman Cometh



By Ron Whittaker

Illustration by Morgan Ian Wilbur

Earthman zero one, this is Paddy. Go ahead with your BDA, over.”

We were “feet wet” off the coast of Vietnam and climbing through the black night to the cooler air above when Paddy called. The mission was basically over, and up front we turned our attention to getting back home, concerned now with more mundane matters such as fuel and weather. The crew had removed their helmets and flack vests for the two-hour ride back to Camranh Bay, while the bombardier navigator (BN) called in our battle damage assessment to Paddy in ground controlled intercept.

It had been another good mission. We had arrived at our initial point south of the Mekong River just before midnight and started our search of the canal system below. Using the low light level television system, the BN spotted a clump of bushes at the intersection of two canals, but the forward-looking infrared sensor showed that the area was “hot”—a camouflaged emplacement of some sort. As we turned in to investigate, the plane captain stationed in the Plexiglas bow started to call out ground fire locations, but the streams of tracers arcing past the cockpit had already gotten our attention. The BN announced his intention to “nape” the target. The flight director on the pilot’s instrument panel jumped to life, giving the pilot steering commands to the release point. The 500-pound napalm released automatically after a brief run-in, and we extended for 60 seconds past the target before starting our turn. The dark sky behind us burst into an orange glow and the plane shook with a staccato rhythm as the tail gunner squeezed off a series of three-second bursts with his

dual 20 mm machine guns.

Our arrival had been a rude wake-up call for the Viet Cong (VC) down below. For years it had been common knowledge that the Army of Vietnam support forces controlled the countryside during the day, but the VC owned the night. They concealed their caches during the day and remained hidden from the Swift boats and aircraft that patrolled the rivers and canals, then resumed their activities after dark, unmolested and uncontested. All that changed with the arrival of the invisible airplanes that could see at night.

For the second pass, the BN selected two 500-pound bombs. The flames from the burning napalm made an easy aiming point, and the BN held his crosshairs right on the center of the target as we started our run. They were ready for us this time, and as we passed over at 1,500 feet everybody on the ground who had ammo opened up on us. We countered with a long burst from the downward-firing 40 mm guns, and both window gunners joined the tail gunner in spraying the area as we extended once again. We felt the reassuring concussions from the two bombs exploding behind us, and the “whoops” over the intercom told us that the bombs had found their target.

Normally, we would have left the area at this point and gone looking for other targets, but the crew was calling secondary explosions and we knew from experience that a well-defended position usually indicated a major supply point. We decided one more pass was in order and positioned ourselves to come in from a third direction. This time the BN used 250-pound bombs. As we approached the burning area we started the wing-mounted Gatling

guns and walked them into the middle of the flames, nudging the rudders to spread the lead around a little. The bombs released cleanly and we finished off with another long burst from the 40s as we passed over, followed by a parting salute from the 20s. Another cache of fuel and ammo had been destroyed and there would be a few less VC in the morning.

The aircraft described in this story was an AP-2H Neptune flown by Heavy Attack Squadron (VAH) 21. Established in September 1968 in Cam Ranh Bay, Republic of South Vietnam, the squadron was disestablished in June 1969. A total of four SP-2Hs were modified by Lockheed at the Burbank, Calif., facility and accepted into VAH-21. In addition to the armament and sensor systems, the heavily armored planes were fitted with state-of-the-art electronics, air conditioning and a special escape system. No planes were lost in the squadron’s brief history, but battle damage from ground fire was a routine problem. Earthman-01 has been restored and is on display at the Pima Air Museum in Tucson, Ariz., site of VAH-21’s 30-year reunion this September.

Capt. Ron Whittaker, USNR (Ret.), joined VAH-21 after a two-year assignment at the Naval Air Development Center, Warminster, Pa. Following his VAH-21 tour, he instructed basic and advanced training at NAS Corpus Christi, Texas, and as a Selected Air Reservist went on to fly P-3 *Orions* in VPs 94 and 68. His last tour of active duty was during Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm.