

THE UNSUNG CANBERRAS

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ON February 19, 1965, near the small Vietnamese town of Bien Gia, 45 miles east of Saigon, a B-57 *Canberra* jet fighter-bomber rolled into a dive and dropped two 750-pound bombs onto the green jungle canopy below. The bombs fell directly on the smoke rocket dropped there moments before by a forward air controller (FAC). Intelligence information had shown that the target was a Viet Cong command post and communications center. A huge secondary explosion followed the drop, smoke mushrooming skyward in a dirty grey cloud.

That strike marked the first time American jet aircraft were used to deliver ordnance in South Vietnam. Until then, only propeller-driven aircraft had provided the air support needed by ground forces.

The *Canberras* flew 16 sorties against that particular target on February 19th. They were joined later in the day by F-100 *Super Sabres* that also dive-bombed and strafed the area. Infantry troops, who entered the target zone later, determined that it had indeed been a VC stronghold. They reported that the air strikes had inflicted heavy damage and caused the surviving enemy insurgents to evacuate their positions.

The men flying that first strike were members of the only two B-57 bombardment units in the United States Air Force—the 8th and 13th Bomb Squadrons. Respectively, these units—“The Liberty Squadron” and the “Devil’s Own Grim Reapers”—lay proud claim to the honors and traditions of the 8th and 13th Aero Squadrons which date from May 1917. They are among the oldest units in the Air Force and a roster of past members reads like a chronology of the Air Force itself.

Although the modern Air Force leans toward heraldic symbols on its unit insignia, the familiar emblem of the 13th still depicts a skeleton holding a scythe underscored with the inscription “Devil’s Own Grim Reapers.” This emblem, reminiscent of the unit’s colorful past, is still worn by squadron members. The unit em-

blem of the 8th Bomb Squadron pictures an American Eagle atop the Liberty Bell.

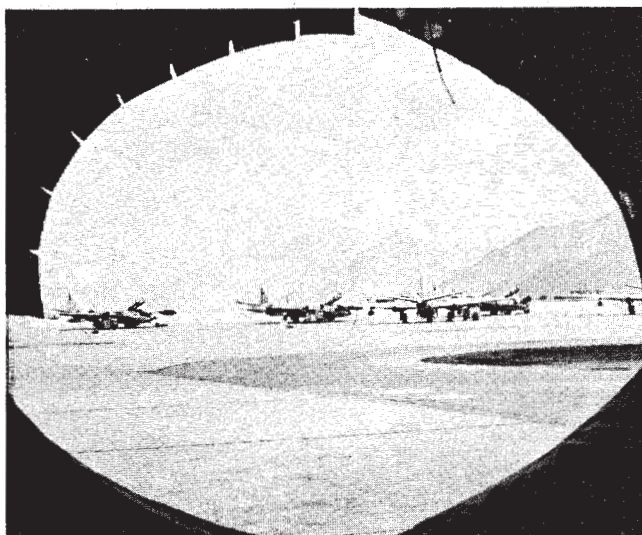
Following the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964, a number of B-57s were deployed from their home station at Clark Air Base in the Philippines to Bien Hoa Air Base. The *Canberra* crews stood ground alert and flew visual reconnaissance missions over South Vietnam, but no bombs were carried and no strike missions were assigned. On Halloween night, the Viet Cong carried out a mortar attack on Bien Hoa with the B-57 parking area as the primary target. Several aircraft were completely destroyed and many others damaged. During this time, the B-57 was scheduled to be phased out of the United States Air Force inventory. It was first delivered to Tactical Air Command in 1954, but several more modern aircraft made it obsolescent for nuclear war—the mission for which it was originally intended.

But now the situation demanded a fast, high-flying aircraft able to carry a heavy load of “iron” (conventional) bombs and loiter over a target for extended periods if necessary. The counter-insurgency action in Vietnam required an aircraft that could dive-bomb and strafe accurately. An aircraft used under these circumstances had to be able to take heavy battle damage and still maintain the capability to bring its crew back from the engagement. The B-57 more than met these mission prerequisites.

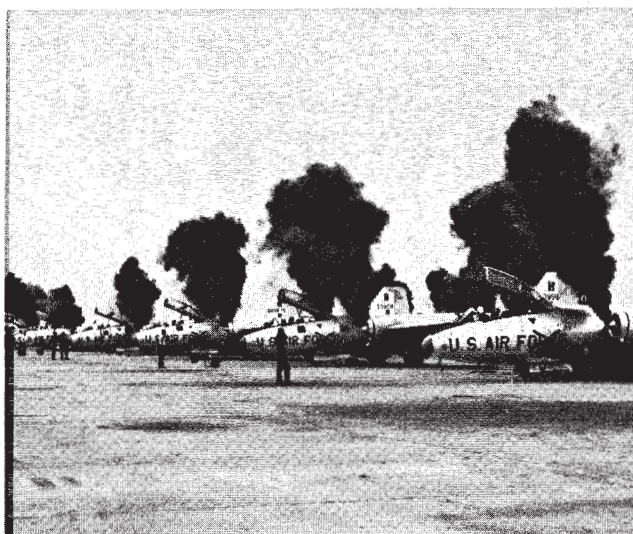
The jet crews had to “grin and bear it” when their counterparts who flew the *Skyriders* from Bien Hoa engaged in good-natured banter about the *Canberra’s* lack of combat experience. These A-1 pilots, along with the Vietnamese Air Force, were the stalwarts of the air war against the Viet Cong. The B-57 fliers itched for a chance to prove their worth.

And then they got their chance.

Late in the evening of February 18, 1965, the order finally came, sending the B-57s on their first live



B-57 Canberras, shown here at Hill AFB, Utah, use latest electronic countermeasures equipment. Before Vietnam, they tested US defenses.



Explosive charges used to start engines of Canberra jets send up clouds of smoke. Plane needs no auxiliary equipment to start engines.

bombing mission. The armament crews worked throughout the night loading aircraft with four 750-pound bombs on the wings and nine 500 pounders in the bomb bay. Wing guns were loaded with .20 millimeter high explosive incendiary ammunition or .50 caliber ammo, depending on the aircraft model. Crew chiefs tenderly cared for their birds, knowing that this was *it*. The mission was relatively simple with the target only 50 miles away, but everything had to be exactly right.

The early morning hours were spent drawing maps and planning everything in intricate detail. On several other occasions it had appeared that the jets would be sent on a bombing mission, but the order had always been cancelled. Now, however, as preparations continued, most of the men began to realize that this was actually going to be their first day of combat in the war in Vietnam. It was.

The checklist was complete. The first *Canberra* taxied from its parking slot and rolled gracefully down the line between two rows of aircraft to the accompaniment of cheers by the remaining ground and air crews. The Liberty Squadron and the Devil's Own Grim Reapers were about to engage in their fourth major conflict.

The rules of engagement required that missions flown in South Vietnam be under control of a FAC. The *Canberra* provided a somewhat unexpected bonus in its potential because it carried two crew members. The B-57 navigator-bombardier was able to keep the FAC in sight, watch the target area, direct the rest of the flight, and call off instrument readings to his pilot during the run. He could also compute corrections and call out check list items to assure that cockpit configurations were correct for each type of attack. This crew coordination allowed the pilot to keep his head in the gunsight and concentrate on flying the aircraft during a bombing or strafing attack. The two-man concept gave the B-57s pinpoint accuracy.

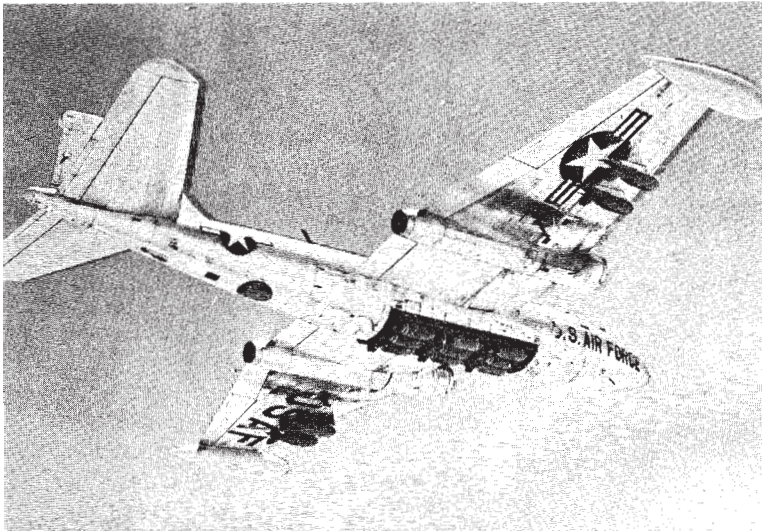
The B-57 crews began averaging two missions a day

per man following their initial strikes.

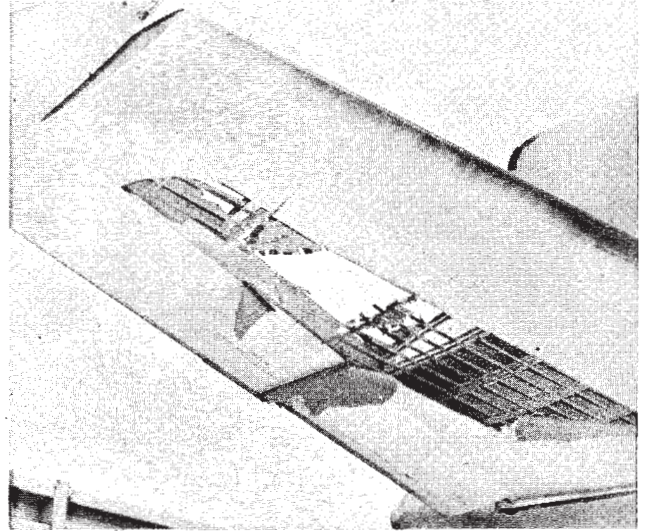
On May 2, 1965, crews of both the 8th and 13th Bomb Squadrons participated in a major raid on the Xom Bang Barracks in North Vietnam. Executing a low-altitude approach to the target, the 20 B-57s "popped up" at the last possible moment and destroyed over 95 percent of the target. Only two aircraft sustained battle damage.

As was the case in Korea, the 8th and 13th were soon called upon to perform night armed road reconnaissance, this time in North Vietnam. The B-57 crews were the first to perform this task, one of the most hazardous and demanding missions in the Southeast Asia theater of operations. As pioneers in this type of mission, the *Canberra* fliers had to develop their own night delivery techniques. Flares, carried in the rear bomb bay, would be dropped over suspected routes of travel. Once the ground was illuminated the planes would dive beneath the flares and attack communist vehicles crawling, blacked-out, along the mountain roads of North Vietnam. The success of this technique is underscored by the fact that this operation in an expanded form is still being used. The constant toll exacted by the night-flying B-57s considerably slowed the resupply of enemy forces in the south. The North Vietnamese were forced to change and repair their routes constantly, expending men and materiel sorely needed for more militant endeavors.

These were the types of missions flown by the *Canberra* units prior to May 16, 1965. On that Sunday morning, a bomb inadvertently exploded under the wing of a B-57 on the parking ramp at Bien Hoa. Sympathetic explosions followed on other bomb-laden aircraft and the entire area went up like a huge string of Chinese firecrackers. When the holocaust had ended, 10 *Canberras*, 11 A-1s and a Navy F-8 that had landed only moments before had been destroyed. Twenty-seven American lives were lost with 102 men wounded.



Bomb bay doors open to reveal its deadly cargo of conventional bombs, this B-57 makes a swift, low approach over a friendly position.



The right horizontal stabilizer of Capt. Larry Mason's B-57 was heavily damaged by enemy ground fire which seriously wounded the navigator.

Only seven *Canberras* survived the blast: four were in the air on a mission and three were at the end of the runway preparing for take-off when the blast occurred.

Within two days, surviving squadron members were conducting combat operations from Tan Son Nhut AB in Saigon. With seven airplanes and two tents pitched by a taxiway for an operations and maintenance office, the job of rebuilding a combat unit was begun.

The unit was built up to normal strength again within the next few weeks. Replacement aircraft and men were flown in and the tempo of combat increased. The *Canberra* crews were among the first called in to aid the stricken special forces camp at Dong Xoai in June when it was partially overrun by a regimental size force of the enemy. Armed with a staggering array of 81mm mortars, machine guns, recoilless rifles, and flame throwers, the Viet Cong had taken advantage of the low-hanging clouds and darkness to launch an attack. By morning (when airpower was called in) the VC had overrun the camp's airstrip and occupied half of the camp itself.

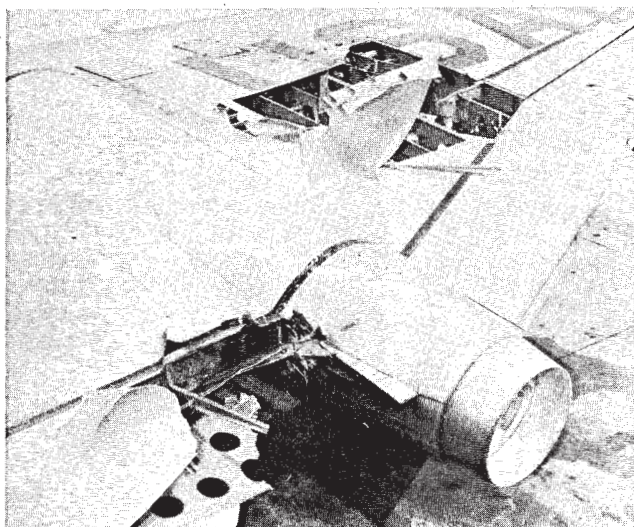
In spite of a 900-foot scattered-to-broken ceiling obscuring the target, the *Canberra* crews elected dive bombing to insure accuracy. The initial drops destroyed six Viet Cong antiaircraft sites. As a result of the B-57 flak suppression, the A-1s striking the approach routes to the compound were able to halt the Viet Cong drive temporarily. The forward air controller at one point called for tactical support against "anything moving outside the compound walls." Close air support was later credited with breaking the enemy attack and reducing friendly casualties.

In July 1965 the B-57 operation in Vietnam was moved from crowded Tan Son Nhut AB to Da Nang. Soon after their arrival the B-57 crews were assigned to fly flak suppression missions with the UC-123 "Ranch Hand" aircraft. These defoliation sorties were flown low and slow over some of the toughest terrain in the world

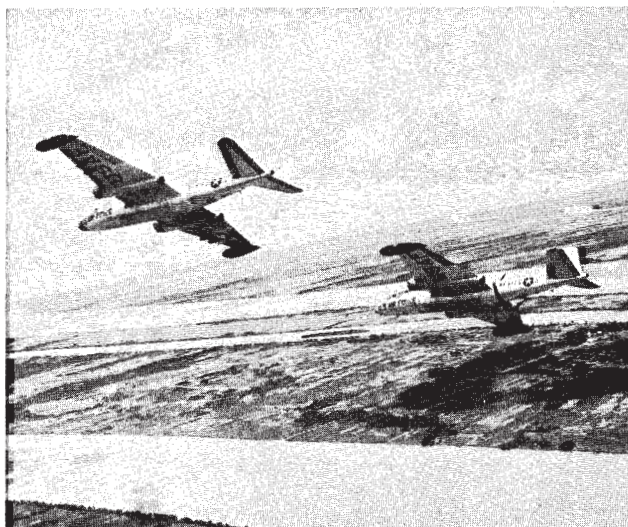
for this type of flying. And hits from ground fire were the rule rather than the exception. Crews suffered casualty rates of almost 50 percent; so high that they wore lavender flying scarves symbolizing the incidence of Purple Hearts awarded the crew members. The "Ranch Hands" and the "Cranberry" fliers immediately established a fine rapport and set about developing tactics that would make the fast jet B-57 compatible with a slow-moving defoliation UC-123. The result of their experimentation was what was tagged locally as an "alternating spiroid maneuver." As the 123s sprayed the jungle in echelon the *Canberras* would spiral back and forth across the top of them. Each fighter-bomber, in turn, would have the area immediately ahead of the Ranch Hands in gunsight so that any enemy ground fire would come under immediate fire from the air.

A silent testimonial to the effectiveness of the bat-winged B-57 in the current conflict is the fact that the Royal Australian Air Force recently assigned a squadron of their *Canberra* aircraft to Phan Rang AB to fly combat missions side by side with the Liberty Squadron and the Devil's Own Grim Reapers. Captured Viet Cong prisoners have confessed that the B-57 is among the most feared aircraft in the war. Fear of an avalanche of bombs from an unseen B-52 is their greatest dread, but the *Canberra* never seems to run out of bombs. They press in on enemy positions persistently. The VC refer to it as "*can sau*," or caterpillar, which is considered disgusting in Vietnam.

The two B-57 squadrons have compiled an impressive record during the period that they have been flying combat missions in the war in Vietnam. During the first mission of the war against Mu Gia Pass on the Ho Chi Minh trail in February 1965, a fighter pilot summed things up pretty well. Four *Canberras* had just made a dive bombing pass on the choke point, a section of the road along a hill only 20 feet wide. Every



B-57 will fly even with considerable battle damage. Capt. Mason's Canberra took a hit in right wing, as well as horizontal stabilizer.



The B-57 was new to the skies of Vietnam in late 1964, but its close support was welcomed by beleaguered defenders in isolated outposts.

bomb dropped by the four B-57s fell exactly on the target area causing a landslide that obliterated the road amid a heavy cloud of dust and smoke. One of the F-100 pilots flying patrol above witnessed the attack—evidently the first time he had seen this type of aircraft in action. His comment on the radio reflected genuine amazement. "You guys do good work."

When the history of the air war in Vietnam is permanently recorded, that small band of men who flew two dozen B-57 *Canberras* over the steaming jungles and rice paddies of Southeast Asia will have a prominent place. By then the Liberty Squadron and the Devil's Own Grim Reapers will have successfully and gallantly completed their fourth major engagement. M

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