

In Case You Missed It: September 19 Member Meeting Guest Speaker Lieutenant Colonel (Ret.) Wayne Laessig and the AC-119 Gunship

Our guest speaker at the member meeting on September 19 was Lieutenant Colonel Wayne Laessig USAF (Ret.) As Wayne puts it, the Air Force can be very adaptable at times, putting older or unusual aircraft to use in unexpected ways. Case in point: the story he told us of the AC-119 gunships he flew with an Air Force Special Operations Squadron during the Vietnam War. The AC-119 never received the recognition of its younger and older siblings, despite doing a superb job.

The Air Force was initially extremely resistant to the concept of a "gunship" but eventually bowed to the constant pressure exerted by one Captain (later Colonel) Ron Terry. He executed his own unique bureaucratic and tactical end-around to demonstrate their efficacy in combat in late 1964. This resulted in the well-known AC-47. After its success, the plan was to produce the AC-130 but the C-130s necessary were required in their intended role as transport planes. So some older C-119 "Flying Boxcar" transports were converted by adding four 7.62mm miniguns and various infrared and other sights and detectors. A more complete history can be found here: <http://www.theaviationzone.com/factsheets/gunships.asp>



The three types of gunships carried various combinations of miniguns, Gatling cannons, and other high-powered ordnance firing out the left side of the plane, roughly parallel to the wing. They would circle the target in a bank, with their guns in theory retaining their aim on one point. Every seventh round was a tracer. Think about that as you look at this picture of the cone of fire, and imagine the immense "weight of broadside" these ships could hurl.

All is Not as it Initially Seems

At first he was naively exuberant at being assigned to C-119 cargo planes flying out of San Francisco. To him it sounded like a life of milk runs. That was until an older and wiser flier explained that it was actually AC-119G "Shadow" gunships and that the reference to San Francisco really meant a trip to Vietnam.

He soon found himself in Southeast Asia, learning from those who had already learned the hard way. He served there and flew during 1972 and 1973. They were flying numerous missions, almost always at night and often in support of U.S. fire bases. Later they flew many successful tank busting missions over Cambodia.

As the new guy he was put in the co-pilot's seat. The gunships flew low and slow, and when they fired it flew in a 30 degree left bank, slowly circling the target. Every seventh round fired was a tracer which made it easier for the pilot to see what he was hitting. The tracers also provided the exact location of the plane, which unfortunately made it easier for enemy anti-aircraft crews. Many gunships were lost to triple-A.

Flying a Transport Like a Fighter

AA fire directed at the gunship could actually be seen by the plane's crew, and experienced spotters could judge whether the fire they saw was a threat or not. They would call out directions to the pilots, telling them in no uncertain terms to break left or right. Wayne's colorful account made it clear that the degree of urgency in the voices of the spotters translated proportionally to the degree of bank required and the dispatch with which it should be executed. It seems a docile C-119 could be pitched around the sky when the pilots

September 19 Member Meeting Guest Speaker, continued

were properly motivated, thrown 90 degrees up onto one wingtip or the other, and occasionally though unintentionally flipped onto its back and recovered via split-s. Later "K" models (named "Stinger") had a jet engine under each wing, and the pilots would idle one and go full on the other to assist in turns.

A "hover" maneuver was executed when both break left and break right were called for simultaneously. All engines were thrown to idle and the yoke pulled back. This would stall the overloaded gunship and it would drop, hopefully out of the zone of AA fire. Wayne had some rather wry comments about what breaks and hovers were like for the gunners servicing the weaponry in the back of the plane, and the effect of a sudden 2G turn on a 150-pound 20mm ammo can. The crews removed the planes' G-meters because they didn't want to know how badly they were overstressing them and to avoid trouble with maintenance crews.

When warned about approaching MiGs, the gunship pilots would turn so their left flanks were broadside on to the fighters and start firing. To Wayne's knowledge no enemy aircraft were ever shot down like this but it kept them away. The North Vietnamese pilots turned back and left them alone. One can hardly blame them.

AC-119 Gunship Association and Reunions

The pilots and crews of the gunships were an unusually close-knit team. Everyone relied heavily on everyone else, to warn of enemy fire, to warn of sudden turns, to keep the guns served, and to keep out of the trees. All told, over 5,000 men flew, manned, maintained, and managed the AC-119s between 1968 and 1973. In the 1990s the AC-119 Gunship Association was formed. They've held eleven reunions so far, and at the time of this writing the next one is scheduled for September 26 – 30 of this year.

The Last Remaining AC-119

Of the 52 AC-119s there is only one known to have survived. It was discovered sitting neglected on the ramp of what is now Tan Son Nhut Airport, by someone poring over a 2006 Google Earth satellite image. Clandestine ops by an unnamed person or persons sympathetic to the cause provided photos that proved that it is indeed an AC-119K, tail number 53-7850. Amazingly, this is a plane that Wayne flew.



AC-119K #53-7850 at Tan Son Nhut Airport, in 2010

The AC-119 Gunship Association marshaled its resources and launched a campaign to retrieve and restore this ship to static display condition. They have approached the Vietnamese, who are unfortunately very reluctant to part with it. They are building a museum where it and other aircraft from both sides of the war would be displayed. However, there are signs that further negotiation could be successful, which is good because the airframe is badly corroded and getting worse all the time. The Association is ready to move the moment they get the word, with shipping containers, transport, and storage all prepared in advance.

We at the Pacific Coast Air Museum thank Wayne Laessig for his excellent presentation. We also offer our best wishes to him and the AC-119 Gunship Association in their efforts to retrieve this historic aircraft. It represents the heroism of an unsung group of dedicated people, and deserves a place among the other icons of America's rich military history.