



Honoring the MOSQUITO SQUADRON

Vietnam Pilot Grant Lannon Honors Korean War FAC Pioneers

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Walking down the rows of North American T-6 Texan/SNJ/Harvard aircraft at Sun 'n Fun or EAA AirVenture, one could play a game trying to guess the owner's intent in picking the paint schemes. Did the owner of a Guantanamo Bay, Cuba-painted SNJ serve in the U.S. Navy, or might he be of Hispanic or-

igin? Or perhaps the aircraft actually served at "Gitmo" for a significant portion of its life, and that's why the owner chose the paint scheme. Since the T-6 and its numerous variants served in air forces of every continent except Antarctica and for the U.S. Army and Navy, a T-6 owner today could pick an authentic military paint scheme from literally hundreds of squadrons representing

more than 30 nations.

Finding out why an owner picked a particular paint scheme can lead to some interesting history. Such is the case with Warbirds member R. Grant Lannon (WB #22051) of Austin, Texas, whose Harvard Mark II bears the colors of the Mosquitos, a small band of U.S. Air Force pilots and Army observers who flew T-6s in combat during

(Lead Photo) The T-6 was used by the SAAF as a trainer for student pilots, weapons training, and weather and air photographic duties. It was originally armed with two .30-caliber machine guns with racks under the wings for 20-pound bombs and 5-inch rockets. The aircraft was sold surplus in 1995. The number on the side of the airplane, LTA-555, represents an LT-6 that was shot down and destroyed in May 1953. The two-man crew was taken prisoner by the Chinese and repatriated after the truce was signed the same year. Both men are alive today and have given their story to the present owners.

the Korean War. Although Grant did not fly with the Mosquitos, his experience as an airborne forward air controller (FAC) in Vietnam nearly 20 years later endeared the Mosquitoes and their efforts in the T-6 to his heart.

Stinging the Enemy

By the time the Korean War started in June 1950, the jet age was well on its way. British and American aircraft manufacturers had been producing jet-powered fighters, bombers, and ground attack aircraft, including such notable craft as the deHavilland Vampire, Gloster Meteor, and Lockheed P-80 Shooting Star. At the start of the conflict, the U.S. Air Force's 650-plus mph North American F-86 Sabrejet had eclipsed P-80 in speed and agility, and it took on the agile Soviet MiG-15 fighter for control of the Korean skies. It seemed that the age of the propeller plane was over.

But while jet bombers loitered overhead at altitude and ground attack aircraft screamed above the jungle canopy, the U.S. Air Force found that the slower propeller-driven aircraft still had a role to play in aerial warfare. Jets simply flew too high or too fast for human eyes to spot the constantly moving enemy targets usually concealed under dense Korean foliage. After all, this was a different war than Europe or even the Pacific in

World War II. But the smaller prop planes, with their much slower cruising speeds, could find targets of opportunity and then radio for bombers to finish the job. The tactic of using slower observation aircraft to guide bombers and ground-attack aircraft to a target became known as airborne forward air control. Ground-based forward air control had been used in World War II and continued to be of use

in Korea and beyond, but airborne forward air control was something new to the Korean War.

At first, Air Force observers flew with Army close air/ground support pilots in Stinson L-5 Sentinels, but only 14 days into the Korean conflict, Air Force personnel took it upon themselves to create their own squadron. Supporting the 24th Infantry Division with three L-5s and one T-6 Texan trainer, the un-



Triple Nickel still has its original armament control panel in the cockpit.



The original interior shows years of use by the South African air force.

official 10-man squadron flew out of Taejon with Lt. Col. Merrill H. Carlton commanding. Dubbed the "Mosquitoes" due to their small, annoying aircraft that signaled to the enemy that they were about to be "stung," the squadron flew 670 hours in 269 sorties before being organized into an official unit, the 6147th Tactical Control Group (TACG), on August 1, 1950. According to the U.S. Air Force Museum, the Mosquito Squadron was the first to create a "large-scale, comprehensive airborne forward air control (FAC) system."

Before being initially disbanded in 1956, the Mosquitos flew more

than 40,000 sorties in support of United Nations ground forces, the majority in T-6D, T-6E, and LT-6G Texans fitted with 2.25-inch white phosphorous (WP) or smoke rockets. Five-inch WP rockets were also used when the squadron first formed, but as the squadron gained notoriety for its success in supporting Air Force and Army units, it was able to upgrade its aging equipment and obtain newly manufactured aircraft to carry more of the smaller rockets.

Unarmed except for the marker rockets, the FACs flew low and slow over enemy territory, drawing fire from any and every enemy rifle and

anti-aircraft gun in the area. While the T-6 turned out to be a rugged aircraft that could bring its pilot and observer home, even with a 37 mm shell hole in the root of its wing, approximately 80 Mosquito personnel were killed or listed as missing in action, while another 15 spent time as prisoners of war after their T-6s were shot down.

FACs in Vietnam

While Grant Lannon missed the Korean War by about 15 years, he could still identify with the airborne FACs from that era. A 1962 graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy, Lannon spent a tour of duty

Visitors to EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2004's Warbirds area were greeted by Grant Lannon and Ron Dietes' ex-South African air force (SAAF) AT-6. This aircraft was built at North American Aviation's Dallas, Texas, facility and shipped across the Atlantic to the SAAF in 1943 as part of the Lend-Lease program. After returning to the warbird market, Lannon and Dietes restored the Texan in the markings of the 6147th Tactical Control Group, which was active during the Korean War.





Emblem of the Mosquitos.



Nose art from the original *Triple Nickel* has been recreated on Lannon and Dietes' T-6 with the American flag, three nickels, and the famous Mosquito.

in Vietnam as an airborne FAC, piloting Cessna O-1 Bird Dogs and O-2 Skymasters from 1967 to 1968.

"I started flying in the Delta, ended up at Da Nang, and volunteered to fly support at Khe Sanh during the siege," Lannon said during an interview at EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2004. "The job was a lot like what the Mosquitos did, coordinating positions and targets with the ground troops, marking the targets with white phosphorus rockets, and then directing the fast-movers in."

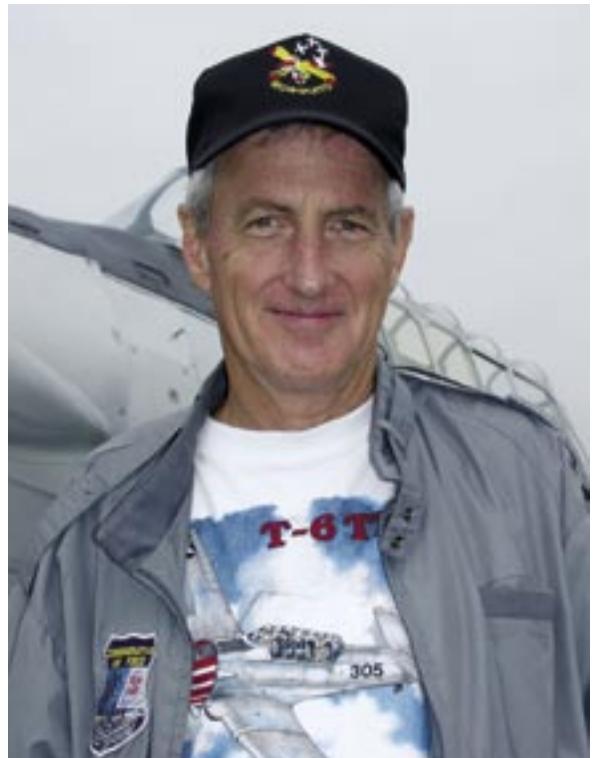
Lannon said that since he flew before the enemy began using heat-seeking missiles, he flew most missions in daylight at 1,500 feet. However, unlike the Mosquitoes, who always used a backseat observer to overcome the deficiency of flying a low-winged aircraft, Lannon generally flew alone unless he had to fly an Army artillery observer or was assigned a nighttime mission.

"During support of Khe Sanh, they occasionally put me on the night shift," Lannon said. "The starlight scope was the only thing we had for night vision, and it was still in the early stages of development with a pretty terrible field of view.

You needed a second person to handle the starlight scope. The good thing was that at night [the enemy] would always shoot at the sound of the airplane, and so they were always shooting behind you."

Lannon said another difference between flying airborne FAC during Vietnam was that there was no front line like in Korea. While the Mosquitoes constantly moved with the front, the airborne FACs in Vietnam were launched from relatively stable bases. Although a pilot may move from base to base per new assignments, the entire squadron did not constantly move.

After his tour in Vietnam, Lannon spent an additional 12 years in the Air Force, piloting KC-135 tankers for the Strategic Air Command, working as an en-



Having served as an FAC in Vietnam, piloting Cessna O-1 Bird Dogs and O-2 Skymasters from 1967 to 1968, Grant Lannon knew the difficulties FACs faced firsthand, thus his dedication to the restoration of the ex-SAAF T-6 to a pair of Korean War FACs shot down by the enemy.

gineer on the Rockwell B-1A program, and flying C-131 electronic warfare test platforms at Wright-

Shoot

Patterson Air Force Base. "We had to turn off the equipment when the Russian satellites went over," he said.

Retiring in 1982, Lannon took a hiatus from flying, but he continued to work in the aeronautical engineering field. Having earned his master of science in aeronautical engineering degree while in the Air Force, he went to work for what is now BAE Systems, assisting on such varied projects as turning F-4 Phantoms into drones; developing new electronic countermeasures equipment; and introducing a new aircraft, the Israeli-built C-38 Astra, into the Air National Guard's inventory.

Back in the Saddle

Lannon found he couldn't keep away from flying forever, and about 15 years after retiring from the Air Force the flying bug bit him again. He heard there was a Piper Cub, the same type he had learned to fly at 16, available for rent at a nearby grass strip. Reliving his teenage years in the Piper Cub inspired Lannon to get involved with the Central Texas (Centex) Wing of the Commemorative Air Force (CAF), based at San Marcos Municipal Airport, where he flies the CAF's B-25 Mitchell *Yellow Rose*. However, it wasn't enough, and in 2000, Lannon purchased a 1943 North American Harvard Mark IIA (basically equivalent to the AT-6C Texan) with co-owner Ron Dietes.

"Our T-6 was in South Africa from 1943 to 1995 when it was sold [by the South African air force] with all the others," he said. "It was shipped in a crate, put together in McKinney, Texas, and not repainted. It still had the faded international orange paint scheme with giant buzz numbers on the yellow background. I talked my partner into putting it in Mosquito colors because I knew about the FACs flying T-6s in Korea."

Not only is Lannon and Dietes'

Harvard painted in the colors of the Mosquito Squadron but it also recognizes a particular Mosquito, LTA-555, known as *Triple Nickel*, shot down on May 19, 1953. U.S. Air Force 1st Lt. Jack Taylor, a current member of the Mosquito Association, flew that mission with Army observer 2nd Lt. Ben Rebman. Both survived the subsequent bailout and life as prisoners of war (see sidebar).

Although the colors and markings represent *Triple Nickel*, the nose art, featuring a headset-wearing mosquito sitting on a large caliber bullet, is a combination of Mosquito nostalgia and serial number 88-12054's South African heritage. "The airplane's buzz number was 7303, and that's close to a .30-caliber bullet, so its nickname in South Africa was *Bullet*," Lannon said. "The nose art is a combination of *Bullet* and *Triple Nickel*."

While in South Africa, Lannon and Dietes' Harvard served a number of roles, including flight and weapons training, weather spotting, and aerial photography. Armed with two .30-caliber machine guns, 88-12054 still has the photo doors on the bottom of the fuselage and hard points on the wing that carried eight 5-inch Matra rockets, two piggybacked on each wing. To complete the Mosquito's plumage, Lannon would like to carry dummy WP rockets, but the hard points are "all wrong" for the 2.25-inch rockets normally carried by the Mosquito Squadron T-6s. Instead, he may be able to modify the current hard points to carry the 5-inch WP rockets used early on.

"The 2.25-inch rockets would slow the airplane down too much, and with the South African hard points, I can't figure a way to do it," he said. "But it's easy to put one [5-inch] Matra rocket on each side. None of the other Mosquito airplanes have ordinance on them when they fly, so I'm sure they're running into the same problem."

Normally the Mosquitoes flew reconnaissance at 4,000 to 5,000 feet, but on this mission U.S. Air Force pilot Jack Taylor needed to get down to 1,500 feet to attempt to find the activity on the ground. At this low altitude, the T-6 was hit by what Taylor suspected to be quad .50-caliber machine guns. [U.S. Army observer Ben Rebman later said that it was anti-aircraft fire that shot them down; he had seen one round go through the right wing without exploding.] The rounds started an engine fire and shot away the controls.

After Taylor told Rebman to bail out, he jumped but delayed opening his parachute. Rebman had not heard the call to bail out, and in turn had been trying to tell Taylor that he was wounded from shrapnel that pierced his back. Rebman tried taking the controls, but both rudder pedals went to the floor and the stick was loose. The airplane went into an uncontrollable dive and was heading straight down at 450 mph. Rebman turned around and jumped between the horizontal and vertical stabilizers.

Just after Taylor opened his chute, he hit a tree and was suspended 10 feet above the ground. He released one leg strap but had to cut away the other, and he fell to the ground in the middle of the communist Chinese trenches. When he looked up, he was surrounded with several AK-47s aimed at him.

Meanwhile, Rebman had opened his chute, with trained enemy guns on him, though none hit. He went through a small tree and stopped upside down about 2 feet above

Down of LTA-555 May 1953

As told by
Jack Taylor and Ben Rebman
to Grant Lannon

the ground. After disentangling his legs from above, Rebman also cut himself down. His legs, back, and the side of his face were injured, and he had broken skin like a rash above his waist. Later he learned that he had 32 shrapnel holes in his back.

Rebman heard the airplane crash close by and felt the heat as it exploded. He tried to get to a ditch while a .50 caliber gun shot at him from a hill.

Hearing a giant roar, he saw a Marine Corps F4U Corsair coming down the valley just a few feet off the ground, strafing and dropping bombs. The Corsair nearly killed him, but he reached the ditch only to be immediately surrounded by Chinese.

Taylor and Rebman were marched together to a cave where they were held until nightfall, then marched at night to a staging area where they were placed with South Korean POWs. The airmen had Korean printed survival kits that offered rewards for helping the Americans escape. Taylor contacted one of the South Koreans with his kit, and the Korean turned him into the Chinese. So much for friendly allies.

They were treated fairly when they were first captured on the front lines (probably because of one fighting man's respect for another, Taylor said), but as they got further from the front lines, the hostility increased. "One could



COURTESY G. LANNON

A youthful Russ Weaver at the controls of the original *Triple Nickel*.



COURTESY G. LANNON

Nearly 50 years later, Russ takes the controls of Grant Lannon and Ron Dietes' re-creation of the Mosquito's *Triple Nickel*.

suppose that since they were not fighting, they could take their kicks out on any prisoner, since the prisoner was reasonably defenseless," he said.

After the staging area, he and Rebman were taken to Korean farmhouses where they were separated. Taylor was held in a mud attachment to the house, and the Chinese took his shoes to ensure he did not try to escape.

Rebman said the Chinese put a gun to his head many times, and he was put in front of a firing squad twice. He was also denied food as punishment and lost 40 pounds. Sometimes they put him in a small box outside, but he simply kicked the box apart. One time after he kicked the box apart, Rebman walked down to the river and took

a bath (that was the only bath he received in four months). Rebman was amazed that the Chinese didn't punish him for the bath.

Before he got to the permanent camp, a Chinese soldier took Taylor's Army ID and put it in his pocket. Taylor grabbed the soldier, threw his gun on the ground, put the guy in a bear hug, and got his ID back. Those soldiers never threatened him again.

After four months, the war was over, but the prisoners were not told right away. Instead, they were marched and then trucked to a large prison facility near the Yalu River. Weeks later the prisoners were put on a train to Panmunjom for the prisoner exchange. After being welcomed back by a U.S. brigadier general, the ex-POWs were given a delousing and a long shower. For Taylor, freedom meant a great big dish of ice cream followed by a cigar (which he wished he hadn't smoked because it did not sit well right away).

