AERIAL CONVOY OF MEKONG RIVER TRAFFIC -- October 1971
PROJECT CHECO
SOUTHEAST ASIA
REPORT

AERIAL PROTECTION OF MEKONG RIVER CONVOYS IN CAMBODIA

16 SEP 1986

SPECIAL REPORT

DECLASSIFIED
AERIAL PROTECTION OF MEKONG RIVER CONVOYS IN CAMBODIA

I OCTOBER 1971

HQ PACAF
Directorate of Operations Analysis
CHECO/ CORONA HARVEST DIVISION

Prepared by:
CAPT WILLIAM A. MITCHELL
Project CHECO 7th AF, DOAC

SECRET

DECLASSIFIED
The counterinsurgency and unconventional warfare environment of Southeast Asia has resulted in the employment of USAF airpower to meet a multitude of requirements. The varied applications of airpower have involved the full spectrum of USAF aerospace vehicles, support equipment, and manpower. As a result, there has been an accumulation of operational data and experiences that, as a priority, must be collected, documented, and analyzed as to current and future impact upon USAF policies, concepts, and doctrine.

Fortunately, the value of collecting and documenting our SEA experiences was recognized at an early date. In 1962, Hq/USAF directed CINCPACAF to establish an activity that would be primarily responsive to Air Staff requirements and direction, and would provide timely and analytical studies of USAF combat operations in SEA.

Project CHECO, an acronym for Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations, was established to meet this Air Staff requirement. Managed by Hq PACAF, with elements at Hq 7AF and 7AF/13AF, Project CHECO provides a scholarly, "on-going" historical examination, documentation, and reporting on USAF policies, concepts, and doctrine in PACOM. This CHECO report is part of the overall documentation and examination which is being accomplished. It is an authentic source for an assessment of the effectiveness of USAF airpower in PACOM when used in proper context. The reader must view the study in relation to the events and circumstances at the time of its preparation—recognizing that it was prepared on a contemporary basis which restricted perspective and that the author's research was limited to records available within his local headquarters area.

ERNEST C. HARRIN, JR., Major General, USAF
Chief of Staff
DOAD

Department of the Air Force
Headquarters Pacific Air Forces
APO San Francisco 96553

1 October 1971

Project CHECO Report, "Aerial Protection of Mekong River Convoys in Cambodia" (U)

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FOR THE COMMANDER IN CHIEF

MIKE DELEON, Colonel, USAF
Chief, CHECO/CORONA HARVEST Division
Directorate of Operations Analysis
DCS/Operations.

1 Atch Proj CHECO Rprt (S), 1 Oct 71
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## 1. SECRETARY OF THE AIR FORCE

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>SAFAA</td>
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## 2. HEADQUARTERS USAF

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UNCLASSIFIED

f. AFLC

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   (j) ADTC(DLOS)
   (k) ESD(YW)
   (l) AFATL(DL)


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j. PACAF

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4. SEPARATE OPERATING AGENCIES
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c. AU
   1. ACSC-SA ..................... 1
   2. AUL(SE)-69-108 ............. 2
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d. ANALYTIC SERVICES, INC. .......... 1
e. USAFA
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MILITARY DEPARTMENTS, UNIFIED AND SPECIFIED COMMANDS, AND JOINT STAFFS

a. COMUSJAPAN
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d. CINCPACFLT (Code 321)
e. COMUSKOREA (ATTN: J-3)
f. COMUSMACTHAI
g. COMUSMACV (TSCO)
h. COMUSTDC (J3)
i. US CINCEUR (ECJB)
j. US CINC SO (J-31)
k. CINCLANT (N31)
l. CHIEF, NAVAL OPERATIONS
m. COMMANDANT, MARINE CORPS (ABQ)

n. CINCONAD (CHSV-M)
o. DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY (TAGO)
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q. JSTPS
r. SECRETARY OF DEFENSE (OASD/SA)
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v. HQ ALLIED FORCES NORTHERN EUROPE (U.S. DOCUMENTS OFFICE)
w. US MACV (MACJ031)

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l. Senior USAF Representative, U.S. Liaison Office

SPECIAL

a. The RAND Corporation
b. U.S. Air Attache, Vientiane
A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Captain William A. Mitchell is an Instructor in Geography at the United States Air Force Academy. He has served one tour in the Republic of Vietnam. Captain Mitchell has done extensive research in the Middle East and has published in the Professional Geographer, Journal of Geography, Middle East Journal, and the Rocky Mountain Social Science Journal.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FOREWORD</th>
<th>..........................................................</th>
<th>xii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I - BACKGROUND</td>
<td>Composition of Surface Security Forces</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Air Support</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II - THE MEKONG RIVER CONVOY ROUTE</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III - ORGANIZATION OF AIR SUPPORT</td>
<td>USAF, USA, and USN Coverage</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Centralized Control of Assets</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rules of Engagement</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transfer of AC-119Gs to the VNAF</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Command, Control and Tactics</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV - EFFECTIVENESS OF AIR COVERAGE FOR MEKONG RIVER CONVOYS</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>An Analysis of Effectiveness</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER V - CONCLUSION</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td>I. DATA ON ENEMY ATTACKS ON THE MEKONG RIVER CONVOYS</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOOTNOTES</td>
<td>CHAPTER I</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CHAPTER II</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>24</td>
</tr>
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<td>CHAPTER V</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FIGURES

1. POL Supplies in Phnom Penh, Cambodia on 7 January 1971
2. General Location Map of Mekong River Convoys from
   Tan Chau to Phnom Penh
3. Convoy Attacks on the Mekong: Tan Chau to Phnom Penh
4. Mekong River Convoy with Vietnamese Navy Escort
5. Mekong River Convoy Sailing Up-River to Phnom Penh
6. USAF O-2
7. USAF OV-10
8. USAF AC-119G over a Tributary of the Mekong
9. U.S. Army Cobras Flying Cover for a Mekong Convoy
10. U.S. Army LOHs Flying Cover for a Mekong Convoy
11. U.S. Navy Sea Wolf on the Mekong
12. U.S. Navy Black Pony over the Mekong Delta
13. VNAF AC-119Gs are Scheduled for a More Active Role
14. Hypothetical Daytime Convoy with Surface and Air Support
FOREWORD

In early January 1971, the American Embassy in Phnom Penh expressed considerable concern over the critical petroleum, oil, and lubricant (POL) shortages in the Khmer Republic (Cambodia) which had resulted from successful enemy attacks on commercial shipping vessels sailing the Mekong River inside Cambodia. These attacks, combined with the closure of land Route 4 from the port city of Kompong Som, led to an agreement among the United States, the Khmer Republic and the Republic of Vietnam for protection of Mekong River convoys from Tan Chau, Republic of Vietnam (RVN) to Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

This report reviews significant events leading up to the Combined Convoy Security Plan and examines protective air coverage provided by the Cambodian, RVN, and U.S. forces from January to September 1971.
CHAPTER I
BACKGROUND

The Combined Convoy Security Plan for Mekong River security was devised in response to an increasing number of effective enemy attacks on merchant shipping on the Mekong between the Cambodian-Republic of Vietnam border and Phnom Penh. In response to these attacks, the Government of the Khmer Republic (GKR) established a military command entitled Zone Special Mekong (ZSM) for insuring security along the Cambodian portion of the Mekong River. Concern over the grave situation was expressed on 7 January 1971 by the American Embassy in Phnom Penh to the Secretary of State in Washington. The U.S. Embassy was specifically concerned about the fact that from 25 November 1970 through 6 January 1971, there were eight attacks on civilian petroleum, oil, and lubricant tankers transiting the Mekong between Phnom Penh and the Cambodian-RVN border. The Viet Cong success on the Mekong threatened to seal off the vital input of POL and military cargo into Cambodia.

POL supplies reached a critical point on 7 January 1971. (See Figure 1.) With only a few days reserve of most POL products, immediate replenishment was paramount. Under these conditions, to ensure that the Mekong River shipping channel remained open for POL and military cargo, and to prevent isolation of Phnom Penh and large parts of Cambodia, the Combined Mekong Convoy Security Plan was implemented on 12 January 1971. Basically, the plan called for air and surface protection to military and commercial
convoys proceeding from Tan Chau, RVN to Phnom Penh, Cambodia, along the Mekong River.

TRAN HUNG DAO XVIII was the code name selected by the Vietnamese Navy (VNN) to represent the combined naval operation of both VNN and the Khmer Republic. The plan permitted tankers, barges, and merchant ships to assemble at Tan Chau and form into convoys which sailed under the command of the Vietnamese Convoy Operations Commander (COC). The COC was responsible for coordinating river, air, and bank defenses.

Composition of Surface Security Forces

The composition of surface security forces for Mekong River convoys varied with the convoy size. For a representative convoy of 10 ships, the VNN vessels were divided into three groups: Advance, Escort, and Reaction. The Advance group composition included: four Mechanized Landing Craft (LCM) which were modified for use as minesweepers; two River Patrol Boats (PBR) for escorting the Advance group; one Command and Control Boat (CCB) for the COC; one monitor boat (LCM converted into a gunship) for heavy firepower; and three Amphibious Assault Patrol Boats (ASPB). These 11 VNN vessels were used to provide a minesweeping capability and a blocking unit. The blocking unit moved ahead of the commercial convoy and faced the banks at likely ambush points. After the convoy had passed, they again moved ahead to assume another blocking or flanking position.

The Escort group consisted of one Large Landing Support Ship (LSSL) used as the convoy flagship and four Fast Patrol Craft (PCF) for speed
POL SUPPLIES IN PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA ON 7 JANUARY 1971

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SOURCE: (S) Message, American Embassy, Phnom Penh, to Secretary of State, 071310Z Jan 71, Subj: Mekong Access (U).

FIGURE 1
and maneuverability. Additionally, there were two PBRs assigned to each commercial vessel in the convoy. Thus, for a convoy of 10 ships, 20 PBRs would provide escort protection.

The Reaction group was composed of one CCB for the Deputy COC, two ASPBs, and five Armored Troop Carriers (ATC). These vessels carried the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and Forces Armees Nationale Khmer (FANK) ground units which could be placed along the banks if needed. In addition to these reaction units, the ARVN units secured the river banks from Tan Chau to Neak Luong while the FANK units monitored the banks from Neak Luong to Phnom Penh.

A summation of VNN vessels involved in the above example illustrate that 46 vessels were used to ensure that 10 merchant vessels safely sailed the Mekong River.

The Mekong River convoy designation procedures were a modification of those used in WW I and WW II. Commercial convoys between Tan Chau and Phnom Penh were designated TP-1, TP-2, etc., while the return convoy from Phnom Penh to Tan Chau simply had the letters reversed.

Air Support

As originally conceived, air support was to be provided by the Vietnamese, Cambodian, and United States Armed Forces. USAF and U.S. Army assets were specifically included, but in the basic plan no references were made to U.S. Navy air assets. The Seventh Air Force (7AF) was tasked
with providing continuous air coverage for all convoys from the Cambodian-
Republic of Vietnam border to Phnom Penh. The 7AF's role of providing
continuous air coverage began on 17 January 1971.

In actuality, the Cambodians provided no air support while the RVN
contributed occasionally. It was possible that this role would change
in the last month of 1971 or in early 1972. The concluding chapter dis-
cusses future trends for the Mekong River air coverage.
CHAPTER II
THE MEKONG RIVER CONVOY ROUTE

The enemy, with relatively free movement throughout the area, was within rocket and recoilless rifle range of all river traffic along the approximately 70 miles of meandering river between Tan Chau and Phnom Penh. Width along this portion of the river varies from 2,000 to 400 meters—depending on the season—and permits access for ships from 6,000 to 4,000 tons, accordingly. The Mekong River flow begins decreasing in November and reaches its lowest level in May. Terrain along the river is flat to gently rolling and is covered by light vegetation in most places. Primarily due to the lack of drainage, there are many swamps along the river. Extensive rice fields were the predominant landscape feature. (See Figure 2.)

In early January 1971, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) was advised that the Mekong River could be blocked along several areas in the river, probably with the wreck of a single vessel. Evidently operating with this same knowledge, the enemy chose for ambushes those narrow choke points previously identified by the DIA. (See Figure 3.)
GENERAL LOCATION MAP OF MEKONG CONVOYS FROM TAN CHAU TO PHNOM PENH
CONVOY ATTACKS ON THE MEKONG:
TAN CHAU TO PHNOM PENH

ATTACKS

1. 17 JAN 71
2. 17 JAN 71
3. 18 JAN 71
4. 19 JAN 71
5. 23 JAN 71
6. 23 JAN 71
7. 23 JAN 71
8. 25 JAN 71
9. 26 JAN 71
10. 29 JAN 71
11. 30 JAN 71
12. 10 FEB 71
13. 10 FEB 71
14. 10 FEB 71
15. 22 FEB 71
16. 22 FEB 71
17. 22 FEB 71
18. 17 MAR 71
19. 31 MAR 71
20. 29 APR 71
21. 17 MAY 71
22. 17 MAY 71
23. 24 JUN 71
24. 23 JUL 71
25. 13 AUG 71
26. 22 AUG 71
27. 3 SEP 71
28. 12 SEP 71
29. 24 SEP 71

Figure 3
CHAPTER III
ORGANIZATION OF AIR SUPPORT

The Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV), tasked the Seventh Air Force to arrange for continuous air coverage for convoys on the Mekong River from the Cambodian border to Phnom Penh, employing air assets as available and specifically directed the use of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and 7AF tactical air forces. In addition, U.S. Army rotary wing aircraft were also obligated for river coverage. Because of nonavailability of Khmer air assets, their contribution to the convoy security was primarily in ground operations. The Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) contribution will be discussed later.

USAF, USA, and USN Coverage

Under the above guidelines, 7AF established that USAF Forward Air Controller (FAC) OV-10s and 0-2As would provide continuous day and night coverage, respectively. Further, 7AF assets would be used to provide AC-119Gs for continuous day and night coverage. The U.S. Army assets tasked by 7AF for continuous day coverage were one Light Fire Team (LFT), normally consisting of one UH-1H Command and Communications helicopter (C&C); two OH-6A Light Observation helicopters (LOH-Scout); and two AH-1Gs (Cobra). An Army C&C was also assigned for continuous night coverage. Three LFTs were required to ensure that one was on continuous coverage.

In the formative stages of determining the most economical combination of aircraft for adequate coverage, several mixes of aircraft were tried.
A team consisting of one USAF FAC and one gunship was tried first, then a more effective combination of several U.S. Army and USAF aircraft was introduced. The combination discussed in the preceding paragraph proved to be the most effective combination of air coverage and was used for the majority of convoys.

It is now appropriate to discuss the evolution of the U.S. Navy's role in air coverage. In February 1971, the U.S. Navy was requested to provide UH-1 helicopters (Sea Wolves) for night alert. Thus, the initial coverage included an active role for the USAF and U.S. Army while the U.S. Navy air assets were on standby alert.

Only three days after the Combined Convoy Security Plan was directed by COMUSMACV, the U.S. Navy requested an active role in providing air coverage when USAF and VNAF assets were not available. Seventh Air Force claimed sufficient air assets were available and declined the assistance of the Navy.

Approximately three weeks later, 7AF air resources were being severely strained because of its assigned task to also provide air cover for all road convoys in Cambodia. This necessitated a request to COMUSMACV on 9 February 1971 for U.S. Navy rotary and fixed wing tactical air support for the Mekong convoy coverage. Approval for employment of U.S. Navy rotary wing (UH-1B) and heavily armed fixed wing light attack aircraft (OV-10 Black Pony) in support of the convoys was received on 28 February 1971.
Mekong River Convoy
with Vietnamese Navy Escort

FIGURE 4
Mekong River Convoy Sailing
Up-River to Phnom Penh

FIGURE 5
Figure 6

USAF FACs Provided Continuous Air Coverage

Figure 7
UNCLASSIFIED

USAF C-119G over Tributary of the Mekong River

FIGURE 8
U.S. Army Cobras Flying Cover for a Mekong Convoy

FIGURE 9

UNCLASSIFIED
US Army LOHs flying along the river bank covering for a Mekong convoy

FIGURE 10
U.S. Navy Sea Wolf on the Mekong River

FIGURE 11
U.S. Navy Black Pony over the Mekong Delta

FIGURE 12
Centralized Control of Air Assets

Centralized control of air coverage for Mekong River convoys was provided by 7AF Deputy Chief of Staff, Operations. The Special Operations Division (DOXS) and Fighter Division (DOXF) received air coverage requests approximately 48 to 24 hours in advance of convoy movements, in messages from the Combined Task Force 218 (CTF 218). Fragmentary (frag) orders were then issued by DOXS directing air support assignments for U.S. Army LFTs and USAF gunships. USAF FACs were notified about pending convoys by CTF 218; however, DOXF accomplished their frag orders. Similarly, the VNAF assets were identified by VNAF frag orders which were later coordinated with DOXS. Support for unannounced convoys was to be diverted from 7AF air assets which had been originally fragged to Cambodia.

Rules of Engagement

In January 1971, the rules of engagement permitted gunships, FACs or fighter aircraft controlled by FACs to return fire for the purpose of protecting convoys. Initially, when the convoy was under attack, air to ground fire was approved by the surface commander (COC) and FANK liaison officer (both were aboard the COC command ship) without specific approval of the 7AF Tactical Air Control Center. In cases where radio communications between aircraft and the COC was possible, gunships and FACs were permitted to expend to break contact; however, the origin of fire must have been unquestionably pinpointed. Subsequently, the authority to validate targets for air strikes was withdrawn from the FANK liaison officer and COC. This authority was then vested in the FANK liaison officer aboard an airborne
tactical air control center and in the TACC at 7AF.

Even further control was established on 27 March 1971. As a result of increased friendly ground forces along the banks of the Mekong, the entire route from Tan Chau to Phnom Penh was declared a "no-fire" zone. No air to ground firing was allowed unless it was cleared by TACC.

As expected, the enemy took advantage of the allied "no-fire" zone provisions. For example, on Convoy TP-17, B-40 launchers seemed to be in three groups of two each, along and within the settlements on the river banks. U.S. Navy Sea Wolves observed the second and third attacks from directly overhead and claimed to have the source of fire pinpointed. They claimed to be in a position to accurately return the fire, but the Air Mission Commander in the C&C helicopter could not recommend clearance because the Cambodian Liaison Officer in the C&C could not accurately determine where the civilians were. Thus, the FAC and Light Fire Teams were not used. It is interesting to note that an ARVN company commander was in the area 30 minutes prior to the attack and had announced the area was "all quiet."

Transfer of AC-119Gs to the VNAF

A possible void in air coverage was suggested by the 7AF on 18 August 1971. The Deputy Chief of Staff, Operations, 7AF, was concerned over the transfer of AC-119Gs to the VNAF scheduled for 10 September and suggested that the U.S. Navy Sea Wolves would be needed for a more active role. The Sea Wolves had been participating from an alert posture, while the Black
Ponies were seldom tasked. The question was whether the VNAF would be able to provide gunship coverage, during the transition, although they had signed a letter of agreement to provide one AC-47 from Binh Thuy for three hours of night coverage.

To prevent any possible void in air coverage, COMUSMACV directed on 28 August 1971 that U.S. Navy OV-10s would be fragged and placed on alert for immediate scramble. In the same directive, an additional five USAF aircrews were provided to ensure that five VNAF AC-119G sorties were flown daily (five in Cambodia--three of these were tasked in support of the convoys) until the VNAF capability was adequate to assume continuous night coverage.

The VNAF representatives on the Mekong River Tripartite Study Group had stated their desire to provide AC-119 and AC-47 convoy coverage. Since their desires were verbal, COMUSMACV directed that a continuing effort be made to finalize the agreements.

Command, Control, and Tactics

To illustrate the complexity and intricacy of actually expending air-assets in support of Mekong convoys, it is best to look at a hypothetical example. One should realize that there were numerous variables affecting air coverage, and the following explanation could have been modified depending on severity of attack, location of the enemy, etc.

When a convoy came under attack, the COC may have requested air support to suppress the enemy fire. If so, the COC contacted the C&C...
which, in turn, relayed the request to the FAC or Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center (ABCCC). The FAC or ABCCC contacted the TACC and requested clearance to fire.

Upon receiving the request for permission to expend, TACC carefully reviewed the attack area for cultural centers, populated settlements, etc. If it appeared to be a clear area, the TACC contacted the 7AF FANK Liaison Officer who either granted or denied permission to expend. The senior duty officer in TACC then made the final decision.

Once TACC approval was granted (assuming the FANK Liaison had agreed to expend), the FAC or ABCCC was contacted by TACC and granted clearance to expend. The FAC or ABCCC then relayed the clearance to the C&C. If the C&C still desired to expend, it directed the FANK and ARVN ground units to identify their unit locations.

At the first sign of enemy fire, the LOHs had cleared the area. The C&C flew off to about 1000 meters and circled the "hot" area. The lead Cobra attacked and pulled off about 900 to 1,200 feet above the target. The "cover" Cobra followed closely behind, expended, and pulled up about 1,500 to 2,000 feet above the target.

The FAC and C&C observed and monitored the entire operation. If more firepower was needed, the AC-119G, Sea Wolf or Black Pony were used. FACs directed and monitored the additional tactical assets, in addition to marking targets.
HYPOTHETICAL
DAYTIME
MEKONG RIVER
CONVOY WITH
AIR AND
SURFACE
COVER

NOTE: THE U.S. ARMY
COBRAS AND LOHS
DO NOT FLY AT
NIGHT.
USAF AC-119Gs, flying at an elevation of approximately 3,500 feet, circled over the convoys in a large elliptical orbit, day and night, for the duration of the transit. Their heavy fire capability provided by the 7.62mm mini-guns, combined with their extended fuel range of six and one-half hours, made them ideally suited for convoy escorting.