

Royal Thai Air Force Museum Douglas Skyraider

By Brad Hensley & Steve Darke



A-1J 142072 at NAS Alameda.

The Skyraider in the Royal Thai Air Force Museum, Bangkok has long been assumed to be a conglomeration of parts from wrecked airframes, and to have been falsely marked '14/072' for many years. It had been displayed on the gate of Nakhon Phanom AFB near the Thai border with Laos, the base during the Vietnam war of 56th Special Operations Wing (SOW), and was donated to the museum by General Harry C. 'Heine' Aderholt when the US forces left the base.

56th SOW traces its history to the 56th Fighter Group which was a World War II P-47 fighter group assigned to 8th Air Force. During its two-year involvement in the air war in Europe, the group is reported to have damaged or destroyed over 1,500 enemy aircraft, while losing only 25 of its own. After the war the 56th Fighter Wing was activated in 1947, initially using the F-80 Shooting Star, then the F-86 Sabre. The wing was deactivated from 1952 until 1961, when it re-entered service with the F-101 Voodoo. After a further dormant period from 1964, the 56th re-emerged in Thailand in March 1967 as 56th Air Commando Wing, becoming 56th Special Operations Wing a year later. The unit conducted unconventional combat operations over Laos from Nakhon Phanom. 602nd Special Operations Squadron (SOS), to which this Skyraider belonged, was attached to 56th SOW.

The arrival in 2010 of a new volunteer at the RThaiAF museum, Brad Hensley, changed all the assumptions made about the aircraft's history. Brad has practical experience of warbirds like the A-1, being an aircraft mechanic / inspector for 35 years and crew chief on a P-51D. When he first saw the A-1 he thought . . . what plane is it, an H or a J? They are externally identical. He started researching and found the conflicting information on its history.

Firstly, he established that A-1s cannot be readily disassembled (except for the outer wings, horizontal stabiliser, cowl, and rudder), far enough to eliminate all the original markings. Secondly, he noted that the aircraft's last landing was gear up, as can be seen from the ground off and un-repaired inboard flap hinges (see photos on page 189). This led Brad to spend many hours in the hot Thai sun analyzing paint and old markings underneath at least 4 layers of paint.

At first he looked at the vertical stabiliser for USAF markings but only found a mish-mash of Navy markings. Eventually he found his way to the lower aft fuselage and found clear markings showing US Navy, Star and bar, USS Oriskany, A-1J, and 142072 (see photo). Brad has since found the '02' (of the VA152 code AH/502) and the 'ace' symbol (VA152 were nicknamed 'Wild Aces') on the top of the rudder. Unfortunately the data plate is missing.

Next he started contacting people. He used the Skyraider association, which led to a pilot who was known to have been shot down around the correct time. Over many months it became clear that Major Albert J Roberts was the pilot of 602nd SOS A-1J 142072 when it was hit by two 12.7mm rounds in the right wing over northern Laos on 27th December 1968. A hydraulic fire started in the starboard wheel well but, as he was preparing to eject, it extinguished, and he was diverted from Nakhon Phanom to Udorn (the name commonly used for Udorn Thani RTAFB), because Udorn had a longer runway, foam equipment, and arrester gear. The flight, with the right gear hanging down, took about an hour, giving time for the Udorn runway to be foamed for his gear up, flaps up landing, which was filmed, clearly showing Al Roberts as the pilot. Al says he still has the control stick.

With this information, a further check on the airframe in the Royal Thai Air Force Museum showed the fire damage in the starboard wheel well (see photos), as Al Roberts had related.

So there can be little doubt that this is in fact A-1J 142072, and therefore the only A-1J known to exist.

Bu142072; known history is:-

- Accepted by USN 28-Jan-57 at El Segundo

- VA54 'NF' February to December 1957;
- VA155 'NL' December 1957 to October 1958. Carrier deployment to the western Pacific on *USS Hancock* (CVA-19) February to October 1958;
- Overhaul at Alameda;
- VA25 '*Fist of the Fleet*' 'NE' June 1959 to November 1960. Carrier deployment to the western Pacific on *USS Midway* (CVA-41) August 1959 to March 1960;
- VA95 '*Skynights*' 'NG' November 1960 to May 1961;
- Overhaul at Quonset Point;
- VA95 '*Skynights*' 'NG' June 1962 to June 1964. Carrier deployment to the western Pacific on *USS Ranger* (CVA-61) November 1962 to June-1963;
- Overhaul at Quonset Point;
- VA122 'NJ' October 1964 to July 1966;
- Overhaul at Quonset Point;
- VA122 'NJ' October 1966 to April 1967;
- VA152 '*Wild Aces*' 'AH' April 1967 to February 1968. Carrier deployment to the western Pacific on *USS Oriskany* (CVA-34) June 1967 to January 1968, code 'AH/502';
- Stricken at Quonset Point 27-Feb-68;
- TOC by USAF at Quonset Point as 52-142072 27-Feb-68;
- To McClellan, Ca. 14-Oct-68;
- To 633rd SOW Pleiku 05-Nov-68;
- To 56th SOW, 602SOS Nakhon Phanom as 'TT' 12-Dec-68;
- Hit by two 12.7mm rounds in the right wing over northern Laos on 27-Dec-68; gear up landing at Udorn;
- To 633rd SOW Pleiku (*probably administrative only*) 28-Dec-68 and soc same day as "TN" = terminated, flying accident on combat mission;
- Put on static display at Nakhon Phanom RTAFB;
- Donated to RTAF Museum by General Harry C. 'Heine' Aderholt by 1979, and marked '14/072' / 'FR' with 'The Proud American' on the nose; repainted without markings 2009/10.

Thanks to the Royal Thai Air Force Museum for their co-operation with access to the aircraft, Al Roberts for his memories and photos of the last landing of this A-1, and to George Kernahan and Colin Smith for their help with the aircraft's operational history.



Above: A-1J 142072 operating from NAS Atsugi, November 1967.

Below: A-1J 142072 belly-landing at Udorn, December 1968 and, right, the aftermath.

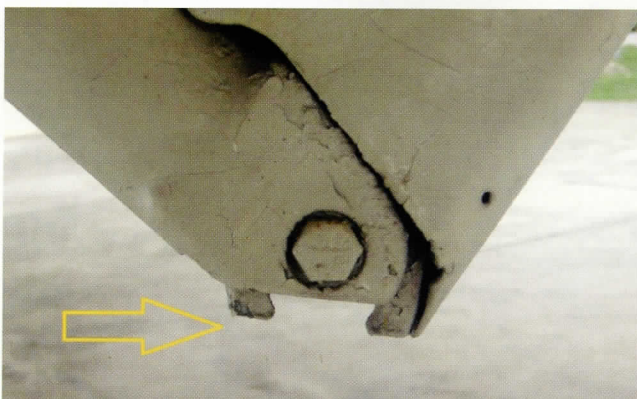




A-1J 142072 at Royal Thai Air Force Museum, July 1994. (Steve Darke)



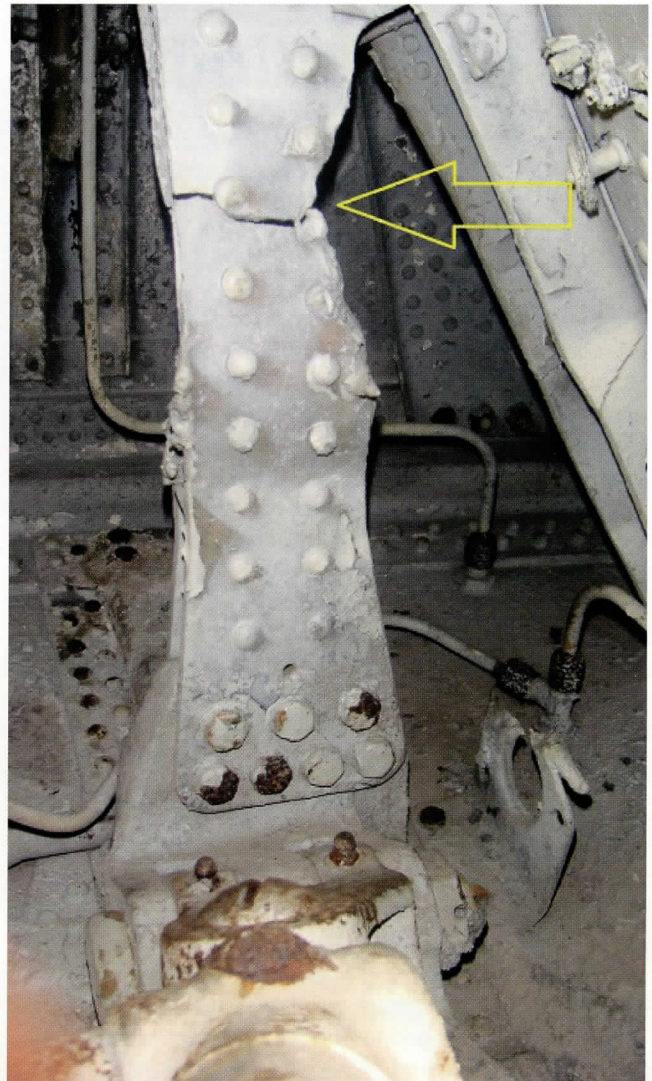
A-1J 142072 at Royal Thai Air Force Museum, January 2010. (Steve Darke)



Inboard flap hinge ground off due to belly landing.



Undamaged outboard flap hinge.



Above left and right: Damage to starboard wheel-well caused by belly-landing.



The first four numbers of serial 142072 can be clearly seen under the paint. The last two numbers are lost because a new plate has been fitted.