



air support and armed reconnaissance over Kandahar after an assassination attempt against Afghanistan's newly elected President Karzai.

During *Operation Anaconda* in Afghanistan in March 2002, three 16th SOS Spectres flew 39 combat missions, unleashing their firepower during a two-week period killing enemy troops and armor while supporting Allied troops who traded blows with enemy forces. Unsurprisingly, the 16th SOS had become the third most deployed unit in the U.S. Air Force. No longer taking a back seat to other programs and budget constraints as it had during the post-Vietnam era, the AC-130 gunship was deemed by military leaders as the aircraft most vital to keep in the inventory. On that premise, the go-ahead was given to make Spectre even better.

Gunboat: the AC-130U

When the gunship *The First Lady*, the first production C-130, was retired on 10 September 1995, along with four other AC-130As, its replacement had long been in the works. The acquisition program for the new gunship stemmed from a Congressional mandate during the mid 1980s to beef up special operations aviation capabilities. Since the active Air Force gunship force numbered less than 20 Spectres, it was decided to add 12 new models. A contract for the major rework was awarded to North American Rockwell's Aircraft Modification Division at Palmdale, California, in July 1987, with the end product becoming the most complex aircraft weapon system in the world. Officially designated the AC-130U, the new gunship was proudly called the Gunboat, or U-boat, by those who flew them. With more than 609,000 lines of software code in its mission computers and

Complementing the two 20mm cannons forward on the AC-130H was the 40mm Bofors cannon and the 105mm Howitzer in the rear fuselage. A total of 256 rounds were carried for the 40mm cannon, which fired at a rate of 100 rounds per minute. The Howitzer fired six to ten rounds per minute. Between the two guns is the radome, housing beacon tracking radar. Visible at upper left is the "Tub" installed around the engine exhaust to reduce the aircraft's infrared signature, to which infrared-seeking missiles are attracted. (U.S. Air Force)



The AC-130A, S/N 54-1630, at Warner Robins AFB in October 1979. The AN/ALQ-87 ECM pods, seen in white, were mounted in pairs on underwing mounts. (R. Ray Leader via Stephen Miller)



In the back of the AC-130U, three gunners operate the 105mm Howitzer, and one operates the 40mm Bofors cannon. The ammunition racks for both weapons are against the opposite side of the fuselage. (U.S. Air Force)



The AC-130H, S/N 87-0128, of the 6510th Test Wing at Edwards AFB, California, in October 1991. Near the nose landing gear is the infrared sensor. (via Larry Davis)



The Spectre's dramatic nose art seen on AC-130U, S/N 87-0128, Big Daddy at Nellis AFB, Nevada, in April 1997. (Sunil Gupta)