

# DRAGONFLY STORY



The A37B Dragonfly was a light aircraft which was developed by the CESSNA corporation from the T-37 trainer aircraft. This resulted from a request from the USAF in 1963 for a counter-insurgency (COIN) aircraft capable of short take-offs or operating from temporary airfields. A new wing needed to be designed, and new turbojet engines fitted which were more powerful than those of the T-37. The USAF designated this aircraft A-37A. Its capabilities were tested in Vietnam and found to be satisfactory. Then in 1967, it was developed into the A-37B with even more powerful engines. A total of 577 were built for use by the USAF and her allies.

The A-37B was designed to carry a range of weapons, including a six-barreled machine gun (GAU-2 BA) carried in the nose of the aircraft. This weapon has a rate of fire of 3,000 rounds per minute, and 1,500 rounds could be carried. There are eight underwing pylons. In the RTAF these were known as 'stations' and Station 1 is near the left wingtip. Naturally, Station 8 is close to the right wingtip. Stations 3 and 6 were specifically designed for carrying permanent 100-gallon fuel tanks. Every photo you see of RTAF T-37B aircraft has these tanks fitted. This leaves six stations for ordnance, which can be of a huge range – from high explosive bombs to napalm bombs, pods for multiple 2.75 inch rockets, and other weapons, up to a total weight of 5,680 pounds.



The range of ordnance which can be carried by the Attack Type 6 (Dragonfly) aircraft.

In 1972, the US Government provided 17 A-37B aircraft to the RTAF. Some sources state that these aircraft were procured under the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program from the USA. If so, this would be similar to the procurement of the OV-10C aircraft in 1971. From searching several documented sources, there is no clear evidence of the actual type of sale. In 1972, the RTAF procured other aircraft from the USA under various military assistance programs (MAP). At the same time, the Republic of South Vietnam received 254 A-37B aircraft. Many of these aircraft were assembled and serviced at the Aircraft Maintenance Centre of the Aviation Maintenance Division at Don Muang airport during January – August 1972. Following assembly and testing, the aircraft were allocated to 43 Tactical Fighter Squadron of Wing 4 at Takhli. Their primary task was the training of pilots who had previously flown F-86F Sabre aircraft. At around this time, the Commander of the Royal Thai Air Force (Air Chief Marshall Bunchu Chanrubeksa) flew several test sorties in the A-37B before the official acceptance ceremony. This ceremony was held on 29 July 1972 at the hardstanding in front of the RTAF Headquarters at Don Muang. The US Ambassador to Thailand was present and acted as the Representative of the US Government. Field Marshall Thanom Kittikajorn, the Thai Prime Minister, was there in his role as Minister of Defense and acted as the representative of the Thai Government. The A-37B aircraft was designated the Type 6 Attack aircraft (B.J. 6) in the Thai military naming system.



Prime Minister Thanom Kittikajorn places a garland on an aircraft during the acceptance ceremony for the A-37B aircraft on 29 July 1972.

The first Commander of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron (or 43 Sqn) during the time of the A-37B was Wing Commander Kan Phimanthip. He had previously been the final Commanding Officer of 17 Squadron and the callsign 'Cobra' was inherited by 43 Sqn. The English motto of the A-37B during its time with 43 Sqn was 'Small but Deadly'. When it entered service with 43 Sqn, the first mission was to bring its pilots to 'combat ready' status. This required the requisite number of pilots to be trained and exercised in order to conduct operations against the Communist insurgents. This insurgency was violent and on-going. At the start of November 1972, 43 Sqn sent a detachment to the annual air-delivered weapons competition for the first time. This competition was used as preparation for actual counter-insurgency (COIN) operations. In January 1974, 43 Sqn sent its A-37B aircraft out on operations for the first time. 432 Flight was raised as an Air Task Force (TF243) (sic). They operated from Nakhon Phanom Air Base. Their mission was to conduct aerial reconnaissance patrols and ground attack missions in support of Area 2 Communist Suppression Division, which had a contiguous area of responsibility of Sakhon Nakhon and Nakhon Phanom provinces.

Most of 43 Sqn conducted its normal operations in Takhli; however from January 1973 a detachment of A-37B was conducting ground attack missions to destroy operating bases, troop concentrations, and food sources of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). This was conducted in support of Exercise JOINT OPERATIONAL FORCE (Training Year) 16, which was an exercise within an actual operational setting. The objective was the suppression of the CPT by regional forces within a specific timeframe, and the development of a concept for joint air/regional force operations. This resulted in a reduction in CPT influence and destruction of its forces in the lower Northern region of Thailand. In the three provinces of Phitsanulok, Phetchabun, and Loei. In those regions which required a more military response to the insurgency, the A-37B aircraft would be used to provide support to regional forces for another several years.

In the east, the A-37B was used to attack secure bases and food sources of the CPT. 404 Section of the CPT received arms shipments from Communist China via the Khmer Rouge. Apart from this, the CPT also established and occupied secure bases within Cambodia. Therefore, Thai provinces which bordered Cambodia (including Prachinburi at that time) especially Thaphraya and Arunyapraphet districts, had CPT strongholds. In these areas, the A-37B aircraft of 403 Sqn (sic) would fly directly from Takhli to deliver their ordnance and then return to base.



Armourers from 43 Sqn fit a Mk82 500 pound bomb to an A-37B aircraft.

In 1977, 43 Sqn was retitled to be 403 Sqn but continued to use A-37B aircraft. In the middle of 1980 the RTAF considered a number of modifications to its aerial force with the grouping of the two T-28D ground-attack squadrons (211 Tactical Fighter Sqn in Ubon, and 231 Tactical Fighter Sqn in Udon) into a single squadron – 231 Sqn. This then allowed 211 Sqn to receive A-37B aircraft from 403 Sqn. The callsign ‘Eagle’ was retained as it had been used by 211 Sqn with the T-28D during 1977-80. The motto of the A-37B aircraft in 211 Sqn was ‘On Time On Target’.

When A-37B aircraft moved to Ubon, their role changed from operations against CPT forces to operations against foreign forces which might seek to breach Thai territorial sovereignty in the southern area of North-east Thailand. This extended from Ubon to Buriram province which had a land border with Cambodia. Since 1979 Vietnam had invaded Cambodia and seized control of the government from the Khmer Rouge. However, remaining Khmer Rouge forces, along with other groups, namely the Prince Sihanouk group, the Son Sarn group (Three Cambodias Group) formed a coalition to resist the Vietnamese military and the Khmer forces of the Vietnamese-supported Haeng Samrin government. The Khmer coalition forces were continually attacked until they were forced to establish firm bases close to the Thai border. When Vietnamese forces conducted sweeps against them, they would take advantage of the situation and conduct a series of incursions into Thai territory. Airstrikes were required to repel the foreign incursions. These were regarded as difficult and highly dangerous missions as the forces were not small like the CPT, armed with light weapons to offer resistance. Rather they

were based on battalions or regiments with many types of heavy weapons including tanks, artillery, anti-aircraft artillery, and surface-to-air guided missiles.

Since 1989, the international border in southern north-east Thailand has been peaceful. This began when Vietnamese forces withdrew from Cambodia. The long-term mission of the A-37B was reduced to become reconnaissance patrols to monitor movements in the border region. Apart from that, there were combined (international) exercises with other air forces, and A-37B aircraft were always used. There was a special mission – in support of the firing of air-to-air guided missiles. The A-37B aircraft would release flares to act as targets for Sidewinder (AIM-9P) and Python III missiles. In May 1994, and 22 years in RTAF service, it was time for the A-37B to be retired. 211 Sqn received F-5E/F aircraft from 403 Sqn of Wing 4 at Takhli as replacement aircraft.

In 1995, some of the A-37B aircraft returned to service in a new role: in the Royal Rain-Making Project. They fired weapons which contained locally-produced silver iodide crystals. This was a joint venture project between the RTAF Science and Weapons Development Centre, the Office of Royal Rain-Making, the Agricultural Aviation Department, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives. The choice of A-37B aircraft was made as a result of a trial in 1993 which demonstrated that the A-37B was the most appropriate aircraft for firing weapons loaded with silver iodide crystals. This trial demonstrated that the aircraft needed to fly at over 20,000 feet in order to fire its silver iodide ammunition into clouds to cause rain. In the same month it was shown that the A-37B aircraft were still somewhat serviceable as they had not been out of service for a long time. However in 1996 the A-37B was permanently retired from service.

For more than 20 years the A-37B was in service with the RTAF, in Takhli and Ubon. It performed brave acts in protecting Thailand territorial sovereignty which will be remembered forever. Although it passed from service over 10 years ago, it is believed that many of us will never forget the Dragonfly.

Finally, I must especially thank Wing 2 of the RTAF, which provided ‘Arms of Wing 2’ which I first published in Tango magazine Issue 156 July 2005 (pages 43-45). This was part of a series ‘90 Years of Wing 2’ which I was able to see at the start of the October 2010. I was disappointed that I had not previously known about the publishing of this book. ...but wish that when 2019 comes around there will be a Centenary publication by Wing 2. I would love to have the opportunity to help in any way, no matter how small in supporting such a commemorative project.



In the mission to support air-to-air weapons training, the A-37B was fitted with launchers for 8-12 LUU-1 flares. D Wing 21), and SQNLDR Phiphop Buawirat.

Let's look at the bravery of FLTLT Phaibun Chummano. See photo below.

On 15 April 1984 at 0910h, in the Joint and Combined exercise AIRTHAMAL 3 was conducting a ground attack on a target on the Thai-Malaysian border in conjunction with the Royal Malaysian Air Force. The target was in the region of Danaomaero district, Amphur Muang, Yala Province (in reality, AIRTHAMAL exercises were cover for actual bilateral air force operations against threat forces which were a threat to both nations). These threat forces used an unknown type of weapon to engage an A-37B aircraft (serial number 71-0796 – B.J. 6-1/15) of 211 Tactical Fighter Squadron of Wing 20 based in Ubon. This resulted in the aircraft being shot down and caused the deaths of FLTLT Phaibun Chammano, and, FLGOFFR Prawat Song-Sawang. In 2009 the wreckage was discovered in Yala Province.



A-37B pilots of Wing 21 who competed in the 1983 air weapons delivery competition. From left: FLTLT Phaibun Chammano, Unknown, WGCDR Prajuap Henklang (CO 211 Sqn), GPCAPT Pricha Niyom-Thai (COMD Wing 21), WGCDR Rangsit Thanomsingh (Deputy COM)

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