

Up From Kitty Hawk 1964-1970



1964

Jan. 8, 1964. The newest Air Force decoration, the Air Force Cross, is posthumously awarded to reconnaissance pilot Maj. Rudolf Anderson Jr., the only combat casualty of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

Feb. 3, 1964. Four airmen locked in a spaceship simulator exhibit no ill effects after exposure to a pure oxygen atmosphere for 30 days.

Feb. 29, 1964. President Lyndon B. Johnson announces the existence of the Lockheed A-11 (YF-12A), with a cruising speed of more than Mach 3 at altitudes above 70,000 feet. The airplane was ordered as a single-seat reconnaissance aircraft for the CIA in 1960. Only three YF-12A interceptors are built, and the SR-71 program for the Air Force takes precedence.

April 26, 1964. At Norfolk, Va., the USAF Thunderbirds fly their first show in the Republic F-105B Thunderchief. The team would only perform six shows in the Thud, as it was soon determined that it was not a suitable show aircraft.

May 11, 1964. The North American XB-70 Valkyrie is rolled out at Palmdale, Calif. Designed to fly at three times the speed of sound and at altitudes above 70,000 feet, the XB-70 is originally planned as a manned bomber, but funding limitations allow for only two aircraft, to be used strictly for testing and research. Read [The Ride of the Valkyrie](#)

August 1964. USAF moves into Southeast Asia in force. B-57s from Clark AB, Philippines, deploy to Bien Hoa, South Vietnam and additional F-100s move to Da Nang on Aug. 5. Eighteen F-105s deploy from Japan to Korat RTAB, Thailand, beginning Aug. 6.

Aug. 2, 1964. The destroyer USS Maddox (DD-731) is attacked by North Vietnamese patrol boats in the Gulf of Tonkin. A second incident, involving USS Turner Joy (DD-731), reportedly occurs two days later. Congress passes the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution on Aug. 7.

Aug. 19, 1964. The Hughes Syncom III satellite is launched by a Thor-Delta launch vehicle. After several weeks of maneuvers, it becomes the world's first geosynchronous satellite.

Sept. 21, 1964. Company pilot Alvin S. White and USAF Col. Joseph F. Cotton make the first flight of the North American XB-70A Valkyrie from Air Force Plant 42 in Palmdale, Calif.

Sept. 28, 1964. USS Daniel Webster (SSBN-626), the first submarine equipped with the Lockheed UGM-27C (A3) Polaris sea-launched ballistic missile, departs Charleston, S.C., on its first patrol.

Nov. 17–26, 1964. C-130s flown by US Air Forces in Europe crews deliver Belgian paratroopers to the Congo for a rescue operation credited with saving the lives of nearly 2,000 hostages threatened by rebels at Stanleyville.

Dec. 14, 1964. US Air Force flies the first “Barrel Roll” armed reconnaissance mission in Laos.

Dec. 15, 1964. Taking off from Bien Hoa AB, South Vietnam, Capt. Jack Terry and a crew of six makes the first combat mission in the Douglas FC-47 (later redesignated AC-47) gunship, attacking enemy sampan, buildings, trails, and suspected jungle staging areas. A C-47 transport modified with three side firing General Electric SUU-11A 7.62 mm miniguns, the gunships, soon to be known by their radio call sign “Spooky,” were an instant success. Read [The Awesome Power of Air Force Gunships](#)

Dec. 21, 1964. Company pilots Richard Johnson and Val Prahl make the first flight of the variable-geometry General Dynamics F-111A from Air Force Plant 4 in Fort Worth, Tex. The flight lasts 22 minutes.

Dec. 22, 1964. Lockheed gets approval to start development for the Air Force of the CX-HLS transport, which will become the C-5A. Also on this date, company pilot Bob Gilliland makes the first flight of the Lockheed SR-71A “Blackbird” strategic reconnaissance aircraft from Palmdale, Calif. He takes the aircraft to an altitude exceeding 45,000 feet and a speed of more than 1,000 mph on the flight.

1965

Feb. 1, 1965. The first Boeing LGM-30F Minuteman II ICBM unit, the 447th Strategic Missile Squadron at Grand Forks AFB, N.D., is activated.

Feb. 1, 1965. Gen. John P. McConnell becomes Air Force Chief of Staff.

Feb. 8, 1965. The Air Force performs its first retaliatory air strike in North Vietnam. A North American F-100 Super Sabre flies cover for attacking South Vietnamese fighter aircraft, suppressing ground fire in the target area.

Feb. 18, 1965. First Air Force jet raids are flown against an enemy concentration in South Vietnam. American pilots fly Martin B-57 Canberra bombers and North American F-100 fighters against the Viet Cong in South Vietnam, near An Khe.

Feb. 25, 1965. The Douglas DC-9, the first airliner to have rear-mounted jet engines, makes its first flight. It enters service on Dec. 8 with Delta Air Lines.

March 1, 1965. An unarmed Boeing LGM-30B Minuteman I ICBM is successfully launched from an underground silo 10 miles north of Newell, S.D. It is the first time a site other than Vandenberg AFB, Calif., or Cape Kennedy (Canaveral) AFS, Fla., is used for an ICBM launch.

March 2, 1965. Capt. Hayden J. Lockhart, flying an F-100 in a raid against an ammunition dump north of the Vietnamese demilitarized zone, is shot down and becomes the first Air Force pilot to be taken prisoner by the North Vietnamese. He will not be released until Feb. 12, 1973.

March 23, 1965. Air Force Maj. Virgil I. “Gus” Grissom becomes the first astronaut in the manned spaceflight program to go aloft a second time, as he and Navy Lt. Cmdr. John W. Young are launched on the first Gemini mission, Gemini 3. This three-orbit, four-hour, 53-minute shakedown flight is also the first time a spacecraft’s orbit is changed in space.

May 1, 1965. Using two Lockheed YF-12As, three Air Force crews set six class and absolute records at Edwards AFB, Calif. Col. Robert Stevens and RSO Lt. Col. Daniel Andre set the recognized absolute speed record with a mark of 2,070.115 mph over the 10.1-mile straight course.

May 10, 1965. Tactical control of aircraft in battle areas is assigned to the Air Force by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

June 3–7, 1965. Air Force Maj. Edward H. White makes the first US spacewalk. He and Air Force Maj. James A. McDivitt, set a space endurance record as Gemini 4 stays aloft for 97 hours and 32 seconds in 62 orbits. The Gemini 4 mission is the first US spaceflight to be controlled from the Manned Spaceflight Center in Houston, Tex.

June 18, 1965. SAC B-52s are used for the first time in Vietnam, when 28 aircraft strike Viet Cong targets near Saigon.

July 10, 1965. Capt. Thomas S. Roberts, with his back-seater Capt. Ronald C. Anderson, and Capt. Kenneth E. Holcombe, and his back-seater Capt. Arthur C. Clark, both flying McDonnell Douglas F-4C Phantom IIs, shoot down two MiG-17s, the first Air Force air-to-air victories of the Vietnam War.

Aug. 11, 1965. Flying in North American F-100D Super Sabres, the USAF Thunderbirds fly their 1,000th show at Waukegan, Ill.

Aug. 18, 1965. In an effort to combat mounting aircraft losses to North Vietnamese surface to air missiles, an Air Force committee headed by Brig. Gen. K.C. Dempster recommends the installation of radar homing and warning (RHAW) electronic equipment in North American F-100Fs. The Super Sabres will then be used as pathfinders for F-105 strike aircraft by finding and destroying the “Fan Song” radars that are used to direct SA-2 Guideline missiles. This secret modification program is originally known as Project Ferret, but is later changed to Project Wild Weasel.

Aug. 21–29, 1965. The Gemini 5 crew of Air Force Lt. Col. L. Gordon Cooper and Navy Lt. Cmdr. Charles Conrad carry out the US’s first long-duration spaceflight, ending one orbit short of eight full days.

Sept. 27, 1965. Company test pilot John W. Conrad makes the first flight of the Navy’s LTV YA-7A Corsair II attack aircraft at NAS Dallas, Tex. Conrad will make the first flight of the USAF version of the SLUF (Short Little Ugly Feller—polite form) on April 5, 1968. A-7s would be used by both services in Vietnam and will still be in Navy service during Desert Storm.

Oct. 1, 1965. Harold Brown is sworn in as Secretary of the Air Force.

Oct. 14, 1965. With company test pilot Al White and Col. Joe Cotton at the controls, the North American XB-70 Valkyrie research aircraft is taken to Mach 3 for the first time, the speed regime it is designed to investigate.

Nov. 14, 1965. During a prolonged firefight in the Ia Drang Valley in South Vietnam, Army Capt. Ed Freeman, ignoring the fact that the landing zone had been “closed” by the on-scene commander, repeatedly makes resupply flights to the besieged 1st Battalion/7th Cavalry in his Bell UH-1H “Huey” and later makes 14 sorties to evacuate thirty wounded soldiers, who more than likely would have died without prompt medical attention. Captain Freeman is awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. In 2001, Major Freeman (then retired) is awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions at LZ X-Ray, retroactively becoming the first Army helicopter pilot so honored.

Dec. 1, 1965. Four crews flying modified North American F-100F Super Sabres carry out the first Wild Weasel radar suppression mission near the North Vietnam border. The Weasel crews find and attack Fan-Song ground based radars, while the F-105 crews they escort bomb the nearby surface to air missile launch equipment. These coordinated SAM site attacks were collectively known as Operation Ironhand.

Dec. 15, 1965. In a first for the US space program, the crews of Gemini 6 and Gemini 7 rendezvous in space. Unlike the Soviets who had earlier managed to get two spacecraft in close proximity to one another in orbit, the Gemini 6 crew of Navy Capt. Walter Schirra and USAF Maj. Tom Stafford maneuver to within four inches of Gemini 7.

Dec. 22, 1965. Capts. Al Lamb (pilot) and Jack Donovan (electronic warfare officer), flying in a North American F-100F Super Sabre modified for the Wild Weasel radar suppression mission, knock out a North Vietnamese Fan-Song radar at the Yen Bai rail yards north of Hanoi, while the F-105 crews they were escorting destroy the nearby SA-2 SAM site. This attack marked the first success for the Wild Weasel program. Lamb and Donovan were each awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for the mission. Read [Valor: Double Feature](#)

1966

Jan. 1, 1966. Military Air Transport Service is redesignated Military Airlift Command (MAC).

Jan. 1, 1966. Military airlift units of the Air National Guard begin flying about 75 cargo flights a month to Southeast Asia. These flights are in addition to the more than 100 overseas missions a month flown by the ANG in augmenting Military Airlift Command's global airlift mission.

Jan. 17, 1966. A B-52 loaded with four hydrogen bombs collides with a KC-135 while refueling near Palomares, Spain. Seven of the 11 crew members involved are killed. Three of the four weapons are quickly recovered. The fourth, which falls into the Mediterranean Sea, is not recovered until early spring.

Jan. 23, 1966. Military Airlift Command completes Operation Blue Light, the airlift of the Army's 3rd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, from Hawaii to Pleiku, South Vietnam, to offset the buildup of Communist forces there. The airlift begins on Dec. 23, 1965, and its 231 C-141 sorties move approximately 3,000 troops and 4,700 tons of equipment.

Feb. 28, 1966. The US space program suffers its first fatalities, as the Gemini 9 prime crew of Elliot M. See Jr. and Charles A. Bassett II are killed as their Northrop T-38 crashes in St. Louis, Mo., in bad weather. They were on a trip to inspect their spacecraft at the McDonnell Douglas plant at Lambert Field, Mo.

March 4, 1966. A flight of Air Force F-4C Phantoms is attacked by three MiG-17s in the first air-to-air combat of the war over North Vietnam. The MiGs make unsuccessful passes before fleeing to the sanctuary of the Communist capital area.

March 10, 1966. Maj. Bernard F. Fisher, a 1st Air Commando Squadron A-1E pilot, lands on the airstrip at A Chau, South Vietnam, after it has been overrun by North Vietnamese regulars, to rescue downed A-1E pilot Maj. D. Wayne "Jump" Myers. Fisher is later awarded the Medal of Honor for his heroic act. Read [Valor: The Valley of Death](#) and [Into the Valley of Fire](#)

March 12–April 7, 1966. A team of contractor and service pilots set a number of recognized helicopter class records for distance, speed, and altitude over a period of three weeks in the Hughes YOH-6A Cayuse, the preproduction version of the Army's new light observation helicopter.

March 16, 1966. The Gemini 8 crew, Neil A. Armstrong and USAF Maj. David R. Scott, successfully carry out the first docking with another vehicle in space.

April 1, 1966. Seventh Air Force, with headquarters at Saigon, is activated as a subcommand of Pacific Air Forces.

April 11, 1966. A1C William H. Pitsenbarger descends from an Air Force rescue helicopter into the jungle near Bien Ba to help the US Army wounded in one of the most intense fire fights of the Vietnam War. As the casualties increase, he passes up his chance to get out, choosing to stay on the ground with the wounded. He exposes himself to enemy fire at least three times, helping distribute ammunition and pulling wounded soldiers to safer positions, before he is killed. After more than 30 years, the Medal of Honor is finally presented, posthumously, to Pitsenbarger on Dec. 8, 2000. Read [Pitsenbarger, Medal of Honor](#)

April 12, 1966. With company test pilot Al White and Col. Joe Cotton at the controls, the North American XB-70 Valkyrie research aircraft records its highest speed, Mach 3.08.

April 12, 1966. Strategic Air Command B-52 bombers strike targets in North Vietnam for the first time. They hit a supply route in the Mu Gia Pass, about 85 miles north of the border.

April 26, 1966. Maj. Paul J. Gilmore and 1st Lt. William T. Smith became the first Air Force pilots to destroy a MiG-21. Flying escort for F-105 Thunderchiefs near Hanoi, North Vietnam, when the flight is attacked, the F-4C pilots down the MiG with an AIM-9 Sidewinder missile.

April 26, 1966. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara approves a joint recommendation by the Secretaries of the Air Force and Navy to discontinue Navy participation in Military Airlift Command.

June 8, 1966. NASA test pilot Joe Walker is killed when his Lockheed F-104 makes contact with the No. 2 North American XB-70 Valkyrie in flight, gets caught in vortices coming off the Valkyrie's wingtips, and rolls through the XB-70's twin tails. XB-70 copilot Carl Cross is also killed and the Valkyrie, one of only two built, is destroyed.

June 17, 1966. Army Lt. Col. E.L. Nielsen sets a recognized class record for 100-kilometer speed over a closed course (turboprop aircraft) of 293.41 mph in a Grumman OV-1A Mohawk at Peconic River, N.Y.

Aug. 10, 1966. Air Training Command's Officer Training School graduates its 20,000th second lieutenant.

Oct. 7, 1966. The Air Force selects the University of Colorado to conduct independent investigations into unidentified flying object (UFO) reports.

Nov. 11, 1966. The Gemini program comes to an end as Navy Cmdr. James A. Lovell Jr. and Air Force Maj. Edwin E. "Buzz" Aldrin Jr. complete a successful mission on Gemini 12. Aldrin makes three space walks on the 59-orbit mission.

1967

Jan. 2, 1967. USAF 8th Tactical Fighter Wing pilots, led by Col. Robin Olds in the famous MiG sweep Operation Bolo mission, down seven North Vietnamese MiG-21s over the Red River Valley in North Vietnam. Read [MiG Sweep](#)

Jan. 2, 1967. By shooting down a MiG-21, Col. Robin Olds becomes the first and only USAF ace with victories in both World War II and Vietnam. Flying with Olds in the backseat of the McDonnell Douglas F-4C is 1st Lt. Charles Clifton.

Jan. 27, 1967. Astronauts USAF Lt. Col. Virgil I. "Gus" Grissom, Navy Lt. Cmdr. Roger B. Chaffee, and USAF Lt. Col. Edward H. White II are killed in a flash fire aboard their Apollo 1 command module during a ground test. The disaster sets the moon-landing effort back two years.

Feb. 24, 1967. USAF Capt. Hilliard A. Wilbanks, a forward air controller, resorts to firing an M16 rifle out

the side window of his Cessna O-1 Bird Dog to cover the retreat of a South Vietnamese Ranger Battalion caught in an ambush near Dalat, South Vietnam. Severely wounded by ground fire, Wilbanks crashes in the battle area but is rescued by the Rangers. He dies while being evacuated to a hospital. Wilbanks is later posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions. Read [Valor: The Tiger and the Hummingbird](#) and [Bird Dog's Last Battle](#)

March 10, 1967. Air Force F-105 Thunderchief and F-4C Phantom II crews bomb the Thai Nguyen steel plant in North Vietnam for the first time. Capt. Merlyn H. Dethlefsen, an F-105 pilot, is later awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions this day in suppressing enemy air defenses. Read [Valor: The Practice of Professionalism](#) and [Calculated Courage at Thai Nguyen](#)

March 10, 1967. Capt. Mac C. Brestel, an F-105 pilot with the 355th Tactical Fighter Squadron, Takhli RTAB, Thailand, becomes the first Air Force combat crewman to down two MiGs during a single mission.

April 3, 1967. CMSgt Paul W. Airey becomes the first Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force. Read [Chief Airey](#)

April 9, 1967. Company pilots Brien Wygle and Lew Wallick make the first flight of the Boeing 737 airliner at Boeing Field, Seattle, Wash. After a 2.5 hour flight, the duo lands at Paine Field in Everett, Wash. The 737 introduced the concept of two-pilot cockpits and has gone on to become the world's best-selling passenger aircraft.

April 10, 1967. The first B-52 bombing mission is flown from U Tapao AB, Thailand.

April 19, 1967. Over North Vietnam, Maj. Leo K. Thorsness (along with his electronic warfare officer, Capt. Harold E. Johnson) destroys two enemy SAM sites, then shoots down a MiG-17 before escorting search-and-rescue helicopters to a downed aircrew. Although the North American F-105 is very low on fuel, Thorsness attacks four MiG-17s in an effort to draw the enemy aircraft away from area. He then lands at a forward air base. Awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions this day, Thorsness would not receive his medal until 1973, as on April 30, 1967, he is shot down and spends the next six years as a POW. Read [Valor: Wild, Wild Weasel](#) and [Full Day](#)

April 20, 1967. Leading a missile suppression mission over North Vietnam, Navy Lt. Cmdr. Michael Estocin destroys two SA-2 sites. His A-4 Skyhawk is hit by a SA-2 but he destroys a third SAM site. Streaming fuel, he finds a Douglas KA-3 tanker and stays connected all the way back to the USS *Ticonderoga* where he manages to land. Six days later, his aircraft is severely damaged and goes down near Haiphong. Estocin is posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor, but it is not awarded until 1978.

April 28, 1967. McDonnell Company and Douglas Aircraft Company officially merge, forming McDonnell Douglas Corp. However, the union is more of a takeover, as McDonnell buys 1.5 million shares of Douglas stock for \$68 million to complete the transaction, which had been approved by the Douglas board of directors on Jan. 13.

May 13, 1967. For the second time, pilots of the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing, Ubon RTAB, Thailand, shoot down seven MiGs in a single day's action over North Vietnam.

May 20, 1967. Col. Robin Olds (pilot) along with backseater 1st Lt. Stephen Croker, down two MiG-17s over the Bak Le rail yards, giving Olds four aerial victories in Vietnam. He also recorded 12 victories in World War II, making him the only ace to down enemy aircraft in two nonconsecutive wars.

May 31–June 1, 1967. Two Air Force crews flying Sikorsky HH-3E Jolly Green Giants make the first nonstop flight across the Atlantic by helicopter. The 4,271-mile flight takes 30 hours and 46 minutes, and requires nine inflight refuelings. Maj. Herb Zehnder, one of the pilots on this flight, would fly the exact same HH-3E three years later as part of the daring attempt to rescue American servicemen from the Son Tay prisoner of war camp in North Vietnam.

Aug. 2, 1967. Flying Republic F-105 Thunderchiefs, USAF pilots knock out the center span (and damage two others) of the Paul Doumer rail bridge north of Hanoi, a vital supply route and one of the most heavily defended targets in North Vietnam. The rebuilt Doumer bridge would be attacked again on Oct. 25 and dropped again on Dec. 19.

Aug. 19, 1967. Flying a Bell UH-1E "Huey" gunship, Marine Capt. Stephen Pless tries to rescue four Army soldiers under savage attack by Viet Cong on a riverbank south of Da Nang.. Pless scatters the VC with rockets and machine gun fire, lands to rescue the three living soldiers, and gets his overloaded Huey airborne, the skids of the helicopter striking the water on the way out. Pless is awarded the Medal of Honor.

Aug. 26, 1967. Badly injured after his North American F-100F is shot down over North Vietnam, Maj. George E. "Bud" Day is captured and severely tortured. He manages to escape and eventually makes it to the Demilitarized Zone. After several attempts to signal US aircraft, he is ambushed, recaptured, and is later moved to prison in Hanoi where he continues to offer maximum resistance to his captors. Finally released in 1973, Day is awarded the Medal of Honor for his conspicuous gallantry while a POW. Read [Valor: The Long Road to Freedom](#) and [The Strength of Bud Day](#)

Aug. 31, 1967. Male Air Force Military Training Instructors (MTIs) start wearing the olive drab Army style "Smokey Bear" hats to readily identify themselves to others as drill sergeants. In 1974, the color will be changed to Air Force blue. Women MTIs will receive approval to wear their own distinctive style of Smokey Bear hats in 1976. The female instructor hats have the left brim turned upward.

Sept. 9, 1967. Sgt. Duane D. Hackney is presented with the Air Force Cross for bravery in rescuing an Air Force pilot in Vietnam. He is the first living enlisted man to receive the award. Read [Valor: USAF's Most Decorated PJ](#)

Oct. 3, 1967. Maj. William Knight flies the North American X-15A-2 to the unofficial absolute world speed record of Mach 6.72 (4,520 mph) over Edwards AFB, Calif.

Oct. 24, 1967. US airplanes attack North Vietnam's largest air base, Phuc Yen, for the first time in a combined Air Force, Navy, and Marine strike. During the attack, the Air Force downs its 69th MiG. The destruction of this MiG-21 marked the first time a weapons controller aboard an airborne radar aircraft (in this case, a Lockheed EC-121D) had ever directed a successful interception.

Nov. 9, 1967. While attempting to rescue an Army reconnaissance team, Capt. Gerald O. Young's Sikorsky HH-3E is shot down in Laos. Badly burned, he gives aid to a crew member who also escaped from the wreckage. After 17 hours of leading enemy forces away from his injured crewman and himself, the two are rescued. Young is later awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions. Read [Valor: A Hillside Near Khe Sanh](#) and [Flak Trap](#)

Nov. 9, 1967. While on a flight over Laos, Capt. Lance P. Sijan ejects from his disabled McDonnell Douglas F-4C and successfully evades capture for more than six weeks. He is caught but manages to escape. Recaptured and tortured, he later contracts pneumonia and dies. For his conspicuous gallantry as a POW, Sijan is posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. Read [Valor: Lance Sijan's Incredible Journey](#) and [The Courage of Lance Sijan](#)

Nov. 17-Dec. 29, 1967. Operation Eagle Thrust, the largest and longest airlift of troops and cargo from the US to Southeast Asia, begins by C-141 and C-133 aircraft. During the operation, 10,355 paratroopers and 5,118 tons of equipment are airlifted to the combat zone in record time.

Dec. 11, 1967. The Aerospatiale-built Concorde supersonic jetliner prototype rolls out at the company's plant in Toulouse, France.

1968

Jan. 1, 1968. Battle of Khe Sanh begins. Air Force airlifters bring in an average of 165 tons of materiel daily during the 77-day siege. Read [Airpower at Khe Sanh](#)

Jan. 6, 1968. In an amazing feat of airmanship, Army Maj. Patrick Brady, despite dense fog, hilly terrain, close proximity to North Vietnamese troops, intense gunfire, exploding land mines, and injuries to two members of his crew, manages to evacuate 52 wounded US and South Vietnamese soldiers, using three Bell UH-1D "Huey" helicopters (two of which are heavily damaged during the flights) on seven sorties in a single day. He is awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions. In two tours of duty, Brady flies more than 2,000 "Dustoff" (medevac) flights in Vietnam.

Jan. 12, 1968. The Air Force announces a system for tactical units to carry with them everything they need to operate at "bare" bases equipped only with runways, taxiways, parking areas, and a water supply.

Jan. 31, 1968. A helicopter crew down near Hue, South Vietnam, CWO2 Frederick Ferguson quickly organizes an impromptu rescue force of three Bell UH-1 "Huey" gunships and his "slick" UH-1H. At Hue, the helicopters come under intense fire. Flying so low that the North Vietnamese are actually shooting down at him, Ferguson lands in an area with only a couple of feet clearance for his rotor blades. Four wounded Americans and a South Vietnamese soldier are loaded. Retracing his inbound flight, Ferguson finally lands at Hue Phu Bai, his helicopter so damaged it had to be airlifted out. Ferguson is awarded the Medal of Honor.

Feb. 29, 1968. Jeanne M. Holm, director of Women's Air Force, and Helen O'Day, assigned to the Office of the Air Force Chief of Staff, become the first women promoted to permanent colonel. (Under P.L. 90-130, signed by President Johnson Nov. 8, 1967.)

March 2, 1968. The first of 80 C-5A Galaxy transports rolls out at Lockheed's Marietta, Ga., facility.

March 25, 1968. F-111s fly their first combat mission against military targets in North Vietnam.

March 31, 1968. President Johnson announces a partial halt of bombing missions over North Vietnam and proposes peace talks.

May 12, 1968. Lt. Col. Joe M. Jackson, flying an unarmed Fairchild C-123 transport, lands at a forward outpost at Kham Duc, South Vietnam, in a rescue attempt of a Combat Control Team. After a rocket-propelled grenade fired directly at his aircraft proves to be a dud, Jackson takes off with the CCT on board and lands at Da Nang, South Vietnam. He is later awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions. Read [Valor: Deliverance at Kham Duc](#) and [Rescue at Kham Duc](#)

May 18, 1968. In response to a massive flood, the Air Force airlifts 88.5 tons of food and other supplies to Ethiopia.

May 25, 1968. The Grumman EA-6B electronic warfare/airborne jammer prototype makes its first flight at Long Island, NY. The prototype is a highly modified A-6A Intruder fitted with five jamming pods and a bullet fairing for more electronic equipment at the tip of the vertical fin. After the Air Force's EF-111 is retired in the 1990s, the EA-6B, later nicknamed Prowler, becomes the nation's premier tactical airborne jammer and is flown by joint Navy/Air Force and all-Air Force crews operating from Navy aircraft carriers.

June 19, 1968. In a dramatic rescue on a moonless, overcast night in North Vietnam that included two downed aviators (one of whom had a broken leg) traversing 70 yards of dense undergrowth with the enemy closing in behind them, two sets of illuminating flares going out, a rescue hoist that was too short,

and a collision with a tree, Navy Lt. j.g. Clyde Lassen turns on the searchlight of his Kaman UH-2A Seasprite helicopter so the downed crew can find him. They climb aboard; Lieutenant Lassen redlines the helicopter, avoids automatic weapons fire and flak, and recovers, nearly out of fuel, aboard the USS Jouett. Lassen receives the Medal of Honor.

June 30, 1968. The world's largest aircraft, the Lockheed C-5A Galaxy makes its first flight, as company pilots Leo Sullivan and Walt Hensleigh use only 4,500 feet of the 10,000-foot runway at Dobbins AFB, Ga., to get airborne.

July 1, 1968. The first WAF in the Air National Guard is sworn in as a result of passage of P.L. 90-130, which allows ANG to enlist women.

Aug. 13, 1968. The National Guard Technician Act of 1968 becomes a public law, placing full-time Air National Guard and Army National Guard technicians under federal Civil Service retirement.

Aug. 16, 1968. The first test launch of a Boeing LGM-30G Minuteman III ICBM is carried out from Cape Kennedy AFS, Fla.

Aug. 21, 1968. NASA pilot William H. Dana becomes the last pilot to fly into space in the North American X-15 research aircraft. One of seven pilots to earn their astronaut wings in the X-15, Dana attains an altitude of 264,000 feet and a speed of Mach 4.71 in the flight over Edwards AFB, Calif.

Sept. 1, 1968. Lt. Col. William A. Jones III leads a rescue mission for a downed pilot near Dong Hoi, North Vietnam. After several low passes, he finds the pilot and realizes he must destroy a nearby gun emplacement. On his second pass, Jones's aircraft is hit, and the cockpit of his Douglas A-1H is set ablaze. He tries to eject, but the extraction system fails. He then returns to base and, before receiving medical treatment for his burns, reports the exact position of the downed pilot, who is rescued the next day. Jones dies in an aircraft accident in the US before he can be presented the Medal of Honor for his actions the day of the rescue. Read [Valor: A Triumph of Will](#) and [Determination of a Sandy](#)

Oct. 11–22, 1968. Apollo 7, the first test mission following the disastrous Apollo 1 fire, is successfully carried out. Navy Capt. Walter M. Schirra Jr., USAF Maj. Donn F. Eisele, and R. Walter Cunningham stay in Earth orbit for 10 days, 20 hours, nine minutes.

Oct. 24, 1968. With NASA test pilot William H. Dana at the controls, the North American X-15 makes the type's 199th and final flight, completing 10 years of flight testing at Edwards AFB, Calif. The airplane reaches a speed of Mach 5.04 and an altitude of 250,000 feet.

Nov. 1, 1968. President Johnson halts all bombing of North Vietnam.

Nov. 26, 1968. While returning to base, 1st Lt. James P. Fleming and four other Bell UH-1F helicopter pilots get an urgent message from an Army Special Forces team pinned down near a river bank. One helicopter is downed and two others leave the area because of low fuel, but Fleming and another pilot flying in an armed Huey press on with the rescue effort. The first try fails, but not willing to give up, Fleming lands again and is successful in picking up the team. He then lands at his base near Duc Co, South Vietnam, nearly out of fuel. Fleming is later awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions. Read [Valor: Bank Shot](#)

Nov. 30, 1968. The Air Force's Thunderbirds fly their 471st and last show in the North American F-100D Super Sabre. Except for six shows in 1964 when they flew F-105s, the team had been performing in the F-100D's for 13 years.

Dec. 21–27, 1968. Apollo 8 becomes the first manned mission to use the Saturn V booster. Astronauts USAF Col. Frank Borman, Navy Cmdr. James A. Lovell Jr., and USAF Maj. William A. Anders become the first humans to orbit the moon.

Dec. 31, 1968. The Soviet Union conducts the first flight of the Tu-144, the world's first supersonic transport.

1969

Jan. 1, 1969. An Army aircrew, flying in a Bell UH-1C "Huey" is called in to mark targets near Bien Hoa, South Vietnam, with white phosphorous smoke grenades for incoming Air Force fighters. One of the grenades prematurely explodes inside the helicopter and starts "cooking off" the other explosives. SSgt. Rodney Yao's hand is blown off, his face is severely burned, and one arm is paralyzed. Nevertheless, he heaves burning material and boxes out the side of the helicopter. Major John Bahnsen, the pilot, recovers the Huey just above the trees and immediately heads for a hospital. Sergeant Yano succumbs to his injuries shortly after. He is posthumously promoted and awarded the Medal of Honor.

Feb. 4, 1969. The surviving North American XB-70 Valkyrie high-speed research aircraft is retired to the Air Force Museum at Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio. The two XB-70s (one was destroyed after a midair collision) were flown 129 times for 252 hours and 28 minutes by seven contractor, Air Force, and NASA pilots. The two aircraft were flown at twice the speed of sound or better for nearly 52 hours.

Feb. 9, 1969. Boeing conducts the first flight of the 747. The jumbo jet, with standard seating for 347 passengers, introduces high passenger volume to the world's airways.

Feb. 15, 1969. Robert C. Seamans Jr. becomes Secretary of the Air Force.

Feb. 24, 1969. After a North Vietnamese mortar shell rocks their Douglas AC-47 gunship, A1C John L. Levitow, stunned and wounded by shrapnel, flings himself on an activated, smoking magnesium flare, drags himself and the flare to the open cargo door, and tosses it out of the aircraft just before the flare ignites. For saving his fellow crew members and the gunship, Levitow is later awarded the Medal of Honor. He is the only enlisted man to receive the MOH for action in Vietnam and is one of only four enlisted airmen to ever receive the award. Read [Valor: The Saving of Spooky 71](#) and [Twenty Seconds Over Long Binh](#)

Feb. 27, 1969. The aerobics physical fitness program developed by Lt. Col. Kenneth H. Cooper of Air Force Systems Command's Aerospace Medical Laboratory is adopted by the Air Force to replace the 5BX program.

March 3–13, 1969. Air Force astronauts Col. James A. McDivitt and Col. David R. Scott, along with civilian Russell L. Schweickart, carry out the first in-space test of the lunar module while in Earth orbit during the Apollo 9 mission. The flight also marks the first time a crew transfer is made between space vehicles using an internal connection.

April 17, 1969. Maj. Jerauld Gentry makes the first glide flight of the Martin Marietta X-24A lifting body aircraft at Edwards AFB, Calif. The X-24 is one of several aircraft designed to test the advantages of wedge-shaped, wingless aircraft that get their lift from body contours alone that will eventually pave the way to development of the space shuttle.

May 18–26, 1969. In a dress rehearsal for the moon landing, Apollo 10 astronauts USAF Col. Thomas P. Stafford and Cmdr. Eugene A. Cernan fly the lunar module Snoopy to within nine miles of the lunar surface. Astronaut Cmdr. John W. Young remains in orbit aboard Charlie Brown, the command module.

June 1, 1969. The USAF Thunderbirds fly their first show in the McDonnell Douglas F-4E Phantom II for the graduating seniors at the Air Force Academy. The F-4 is the team's sixth show aircraft.

July 1, 1969. Air Force service numbers for military personnel are replaced by Social Security account numbers.

July 20, 1969. Man sets foot on the moon for the first time. At 10:56 p.m. EDT, Apollo 11 astronaut Neil Armstrong puts his left foot on the lunar surface. He and lunar module pilot Col. Edwin E. "Buzz" Aldrin Jr., USAF, spend just under three hours walking on the moon. Command module pilot Lt. Col. Michael Collins, USAF, remains in orbit.

Aug. 1, 1969. Gen. John D. Ryan is appointed Air Force Chief of Staff.

Aug. 1, 1969. CMSgt. Donald L. Harlow becomes Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force.

October 1969. Air Force Magazine cover story, "The Forgotten Americans of the Vietnam War," ignites national concern for the prisoners of war and the missing in action. It is reprinted in condensed form as the lead article in the November 1969 issue of Reader's Digest, is read in its entirety on the floor of Congress, and is inserted into the Congressional Record on six different occasions. This article stirs the conscience of the nation and rallies millions to the cause of the POWs and MIAs. Air Force Magazine publishes an MIA/POW Action Report from June 1970 until September 1974. *Read "The Forgotten Americans of the Vietnam War," Air Force Magazine, October 1969.*

Oct. 2, 1969. Army CWO Michael Novosel and his crew extract 29 South Vietnamese soldiers who are under attack, surrounded, and nearly out of ammunition, on 15 trips in and out of an area of the Kien Tuong Province, South Vietnam. For nearly two hours, Novosel and his Dustoff (medevac) crew, flying in a Bell UH-1H "Huey" have no air cover. On the last pickup, Novosel is injured by machine gun fire. He then picks up 10 soldiers and flies to a Special Forces camp. Novosel, age 47, had piloted Boeing B-29 Superfortresses in World War II and was a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force Reserve before resigning and becoming an Army helicopter pilot, is awarded the Medal of Honor, the oldest pilot ever to be so honored.

Oct. 31, 1969. The last Boeing B-47 Stratojet jet bomber is retired from USAF service, as the aircraft, an EB-47E, is flown to Davis Monthan AFB, Ariz.

Nov. 3, 1969. The Air Force issues a request for proposal for a new bomber to meet its advanced manned strategic aircraft requirement. Its designation will be "B-1."

Nov. 14–24, 1969. Apollo 12 is hit by lightning on liftoff, but Cmdrs. Charles Conrad Jr. and Alan L. Bean make the second manned lunar landing with pinpoint accuracy. The lunar module Intrepid touches down about 200 yards from the Surveyor 3 probe, on the moon since 1967. The all-Navy crew, which also includes Cmdr. Richard F. Gordon Jr., is recovered in the Pacific Ocean by USS *Hornet* (CVS-12).

Dec. 17, 1969. Air Force Secretary Robert Seamans announces the termination of Project Blue Book, the service's program to investigate reports of UFOs.

1970

Feb. 2, 1970. Over Montana, a Convair F-106 Delta Dart enters an uncontrollable flat spin and the pilot ejects. After the pilot and seat depart the aircraft, the aircraft recovers on its own (apparently due to balance and configuration changes), circles, and miraculously makes a gentle belly landing in a snow covered field near the town of Big Sandy. The aircraft is repaired and later returned to service.

Feb. 17, 1970. Crews flying Boeing B-52s bomb targets in northern Laos for the first time.

March 15, 1970. The overseas portion of the Automatic Voice Network (AUTOVON) is completed, making it possible to call any US military installation in the world without leaving one's desk.

March 19, 1970. Air Force Maj. Jerauld Gentry makes the first successful powered flight of the Martin Marietta X-24A lifting-body research aircraft over Edwards AFB, Calif.

April 11–17, 1970. An explosion in the Apollo 13 service module cripples the spaceship and forces the crew to use the lunar module as a lifeboat to get back to Earth. After a tense four days, the Apollo 13 crew safely splashes down in the Pacific.

May 5, 1970. The Air Force Reserve Officers Training Corps admits women after test programs at Ohio State, Auburn University, Drake University, and East Carolina University prove successful.

June 6, 1970. The first operational Lockheed C-5A Galaxy transport is delivered to the 437th Military Airlift Wing at Charleston AFB, S.C. The debut, made before Rep. L. Mendel Rivers (D–S.C.) and most of the House Armed Services Committee, is less than auspicious: The giant aircraft loses a wheel, and several other tires are punctured on landing.

Aug. 21, 1970. Defense Secretary Melvin Laird announces the “Total Force” policy, leading to much greater reliance by the services on Guard and Reserve units.

Aug. 24, 1970. Two Air Force crews complete the first nonstop trans-Pacific helicopter flight as they land their Sikorsky HH-53Cs at Da Nang AB, South Vietnam, after a 9,000-mile flight from Eglin AFB, Fla. The helicopters were refueled in flight.

Nov. 21, 1970. A special task force of Air Force and Army volunteers makes a daring attempt to rescue American servicemen from the Son Tay POW camp about 20 miles west of Hanoi. Read [The Son Tay Raid](#)

Dec. 21, 1970. The Grumman F-14A Tomcat fleet air defense fighter makes its first flight at Long Island, N.Y.