

# Documenting the HO CHI MINH Trail

*Editor's note: Mr. Jenkins is a retired senior master sergeant who served two tours of duty in Vietnam as an aerial and ground combat documentation cameraman, flying more than 100 combat missions.*

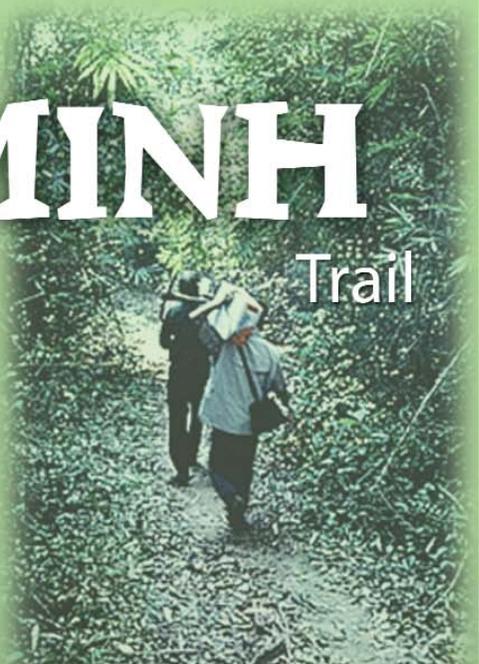
**By Mitchell Jenkins [ ● ]**

1st Combat Camera Squadron

**Point  
of View**

As a 20-year-old airman, day-to-day duties during my first Southeast Asia tour were seldom boring. For the most part, I had unrestricted access to a wide array of operational and humanitarian missions. For the C-130 Gunships, combat photographers were the sole recorders for kills, specifically destroyed enemy supply trucks traveling from the north to the south on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. We had a 24-hour motion picture lab that quickly processed fighter aircraft's gun film from strike missions. Gunship film was also processed and reviewed daily by intelligence officers and the crewmembers during mission debrief.

One particular mission stands out in my memory. It was Dec. 20, 1970, the night before my 21st birthday. I was flying a scheduled combat mission onboard a C-130 gunship. My position on the aircraft was at the rear pilot-side troop door. The top half of the door was cut off to allow for a turret camera mount for my 16mm Arriflex film camera. The camera was butted up to a starlight observation scope, a light enhancement device used to allow night filming. About halfway through our mission, the pilot sighted an extremely large barge crossing a river. Upon taking a closer look, we couldn't believe our eyes. This barge was large enough to carry 26 enemy fuel and ammo trucks. We began an orbit over the area and commenced firing. It quickly became apparent that this barge was very important to the enemy because our aircraft took over 900 rounds of AAA in less than an hour. Luckily, the mission was a success. We recorded the most truck kills of any single gunship mission ever. Imagine trying to tell someone about this mission, only to have him or her say, "Sure they were." But of course, the mission was recorded. This is how I saw my job as a combat documenter. If an event happens, and no one is there to witness or record it, does it happen in the eyes of history? If a tree falls in the forest, and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? I was seldom denied the opportunity to document our forces performing their mission in Southeast Asia.



## About the trail

The Ho Chi Minh Trail was a complex web of jungle paths that enabled communist troops to travel from North Vietnam to areas close to Saigon. It has been estimated that the National Liberation Front received 60 tons of aid per day from this route. Most of this was carried by porters. Occasionally bicycles and ponies would also be used. At regular intervals along the route the NLF built base camps. In the early days of the war it took six months to travel from North Vietnam to Saigon on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. But the more people who travelled along the route the easier it became. By 1970, fit and experienced soldiers could make the journey in six weeks. From the air the Ho Chi Minh Trail was impossible to identify and although the U.S. Air Force tried to destroy this vital supply line by heavy bombing, they were unable to stop the constant flow of men and supplies. The main danger to the people who travelled on the Ho Chi Minh Trail was not American bombs but diseases such as malaria. The North Vietnamese also used the Ho Chi Minh Trail to send soldiers to the south. At times, as many as 20,000 soldiers a month came from Hanoi in this way.