Introduction

What is a *Forward Air Controller?* How did he come about?

Military aviation started with aerial reconnaissance to spot troop disposition and movements and then artillery direction to correct the fall of shot of the big guns. These were roles and adjuncts of the ground army – thus the Army Air Corps was born, in the United States, Europe and Australia. They were known as ***scouts***.

While the roles and capabilities of fighters and bombers expanded dramatically, there remained a need for observation (visual reconnaissance) and direction of artillery fire. This was expanded to include naval gunfire, which also needed visual correction at the massive distances that their heavy guns could fire.

Also you had to be careful not to be shelling your own troops. So any fire near friendlies had to be controlled. The spotter would call the shots and the corrections – and take the blame. Interestingly, the Army designation for these aircraft had the prefix **L**. The **L** was for ***liaison*** – between air and ground units. It later became **O** for Observation in USAF service. (The **O**-1 Bird Dog was originally designated **L**-19.)

The airplane became a powerful weapon of war in its own right and a new military force was born – an ***Air*** Force. As well as strategic bombing and air defence of cities and countries, air power offered another form of firepower to support the ground operations but it, too, needed direction. The fighter and bomber pilots couldn't always tell where the target was nor who was friendly and who was the enemy – there wasn't always a 'front line'. In the case of air support, the spotter now had to provide a clear visual marker for the fighters to aim at. Smoke grenades, incendiary bombs and tracer bullets were used.

Thus the airborne Forward Air Controller evolved from the artillery spotters and observers of WW1, through the ***Pathfinders*** and ***Grasshoppers*** of WW2 and the ***Mosquitoes*** of Korea to the most contentious war of all – Vietnam. In the jungle cover of Vietnam there was no way that high performance fighter aircraft could drop weapons in support of friendly troops without the target being marked for them. Neither side could be seen from the air.

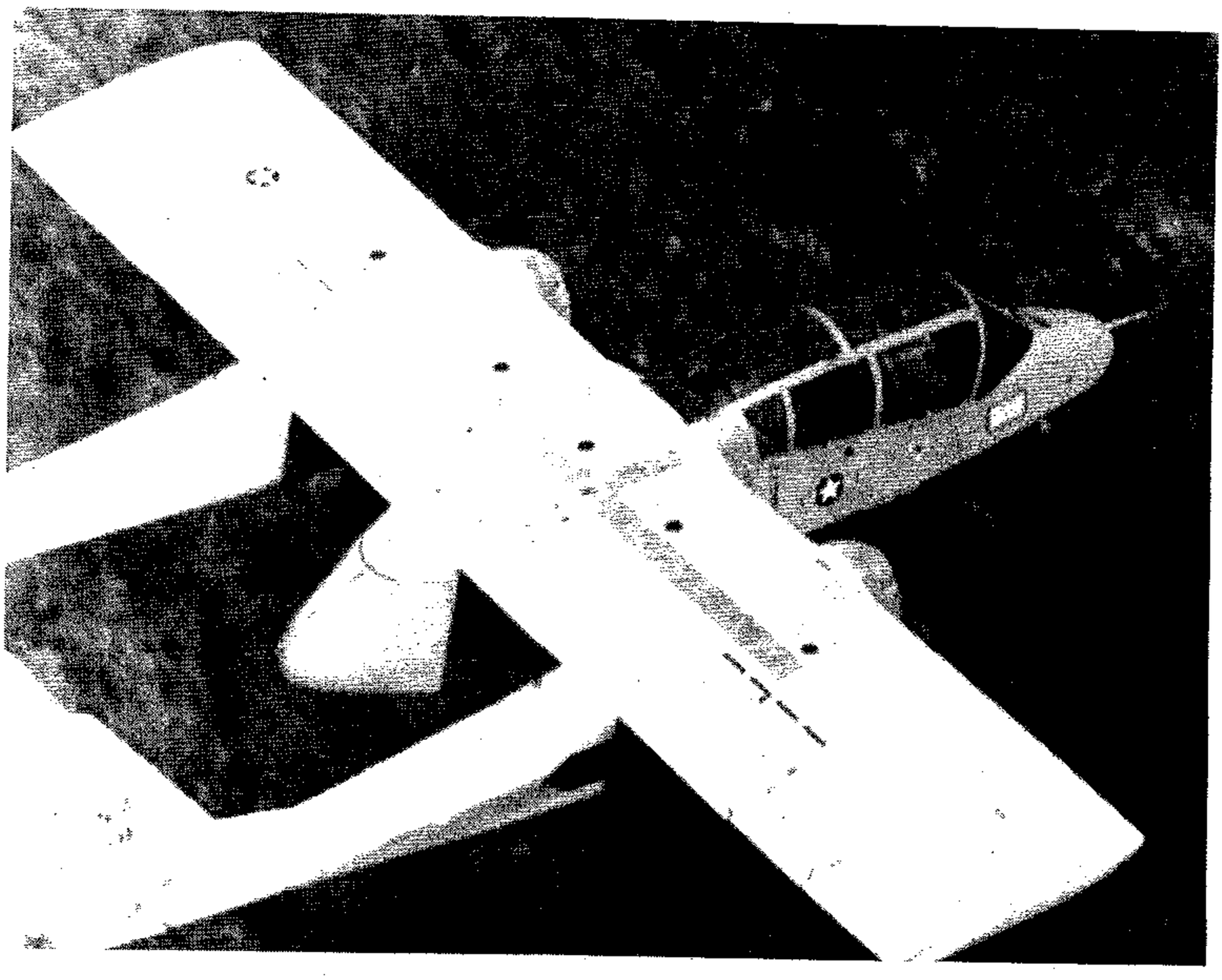
Nowadays, modern systems employ laser target designators and target-seeking cruise missiles but, in Vietnam, the FAC was the eyes and the designator of the target for the fighters. Perhaps they will never be used in this way ever again.

What did a FAC do?

A FAC's daily menu of tasks included visual reconnaissance of a defined Tactical Area of Responsibility about 20 miles square. He got to know this area like the back of his hand. He attended a daily briefing to know what friendly troop movements and tactical operations were planned. He knew what airstrikes were pre-planned for his area. He looked for signs of troop movements, fires, digging, vehicle tracks, cut-down trees, structures, rope bridges – anything that had changed since the day before. He listened on up to five radios to the infantry, the fire support base (artillery), the helicopter fire support teams and Air Cavalry units, the FACnet (the FACs own communications link) and the radar controller for his area. He could call his Tactical Air Control Party for fighters any time his troops were ambushed. Sometimes he would cover and navigate for a Light Observation Helicopter (LOH pronounced ***Loach***) or a Long Range Patrol (LRP) team who would be working deep into enemy territory. He might provide top cover for an armored convoy, a helicopter *medevac* (called a *dust-off*) or he may direct ground or

naval artillery fire. He could map-read to within 100 meters and often provided navigation assistance to LOHs and LRPs.

But his real value was close air support – directing the fighters in support of friendly troops. He may have to mark targets and control airstrikes less than 150 meters from friendly positions, direct artillery, co-ordinate helicopter fire teams and lay down suppressive minigun fire from a gunship – all at the same time. Ultimately, the FAC was responsible for the safety of his troops on the ground. He carried full responsibility for the accuracy of the strike and for not having the fighters fly into a hill – and some of these guys were only 20 years old!



What was special about a FAC airplane?

The observation plane had to be low and slow and easy to fly. However, the ground fire in some areas prevented these operations. To survive, the FAC would have to fly faster and higher. The compromise in Vietnam was to fly above the small arms fire, at 1,500 feet, where there was still a reasonable view of detail on the ground and where an increased speed and distance meant greater safety. However, the FAC now had to mark targets 3,000 – 10,000 feet away.

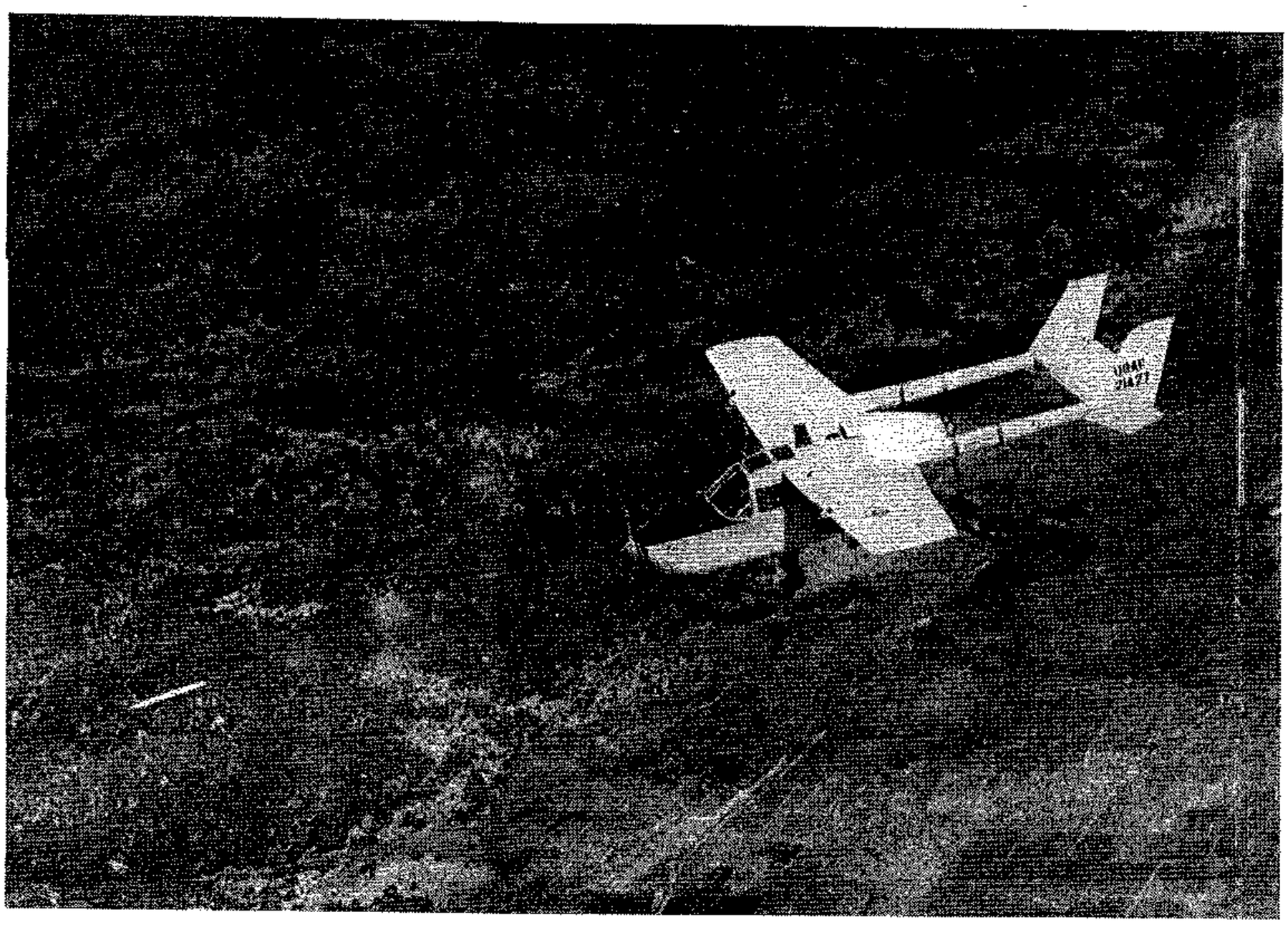
The FAC airplane had to have adequate communications and target marking ability. More radios and better comms (Ultra High Frequency and FM *Fox-Mike*) were easy. Accurate target marking was not so easy. Smoke grenades made the FAC too vulnerable. A new system was needed.

In the 1950s the USAF developed a new weapon for shooting down heavy bombers. It was called the High Velocity Aerial Rocket (HVAR). It was 2.75 inches in diameter and could be fitted with a number of different warheads. One was *white phosphorous* (WP, or ***Willy-Pete***), The white phosphorous gave clearly visible white smoke on impact for 30 seconds or so.

The rocket was designed for interceptors but they could also be carried in small launching tubes or pods. They were light and cheap and many were held in the USAF inventory. Because they were designed for air-to-air combat, they were very high velocity and very accurate.

This was an ideal target marker. The FAC could stand-off a little and still accurately direct the air strike. Thus the FAC aircraft in Vietnam carried tubes or pods of Willy-Petes. When the FAC was spot-on target with his willy-pete, he could simply say to the fighters, ***'Hit my smoke'***.

It was a matter of personal pride for the FAC to be able to say this.



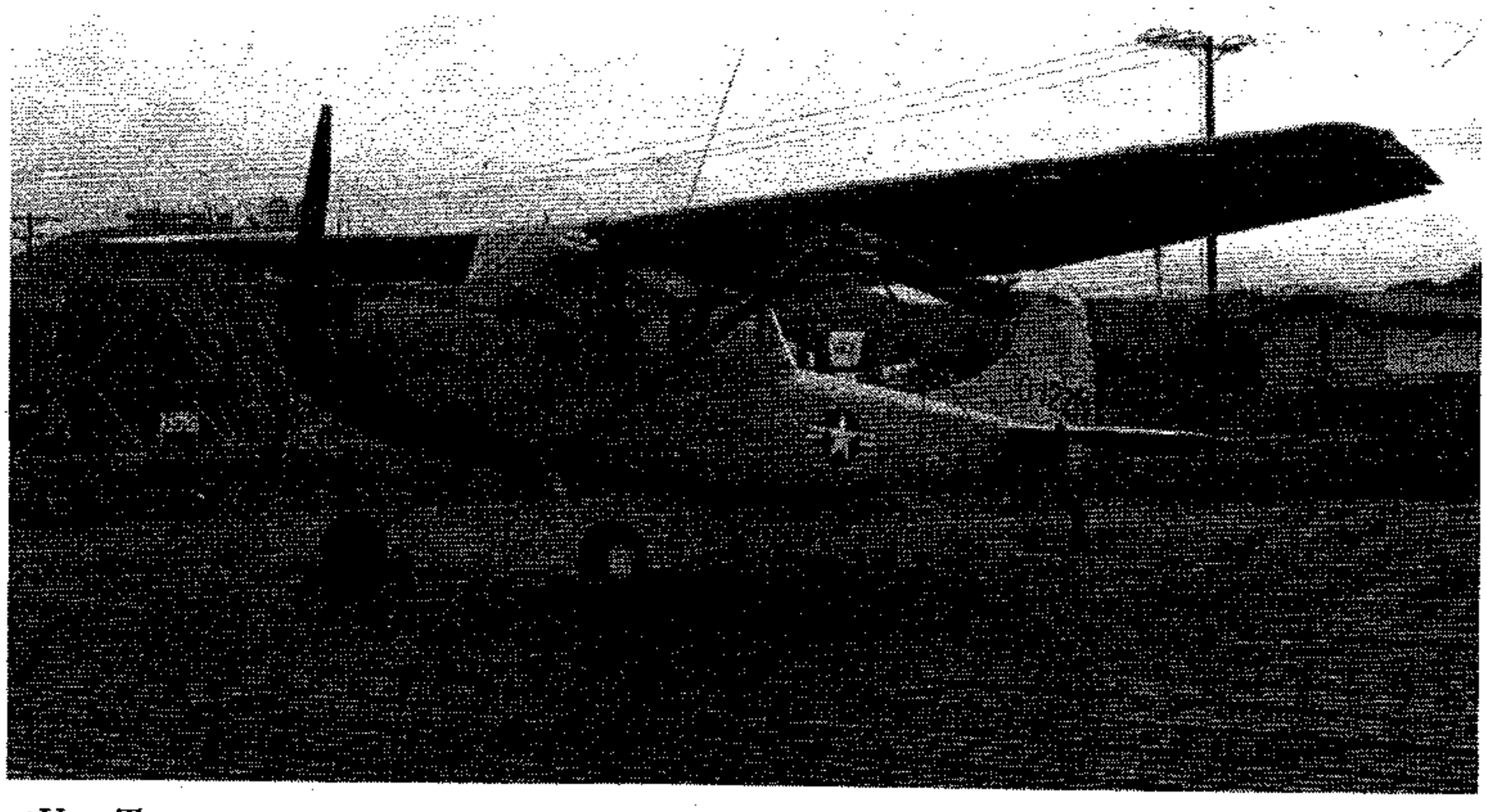
Cessna O-2A firing a Willy-Pete rocket (Courtesy: Royal Australian Air Force Museum)

What were the FAC aircraft?

In the Vietnam war, many different aircraft were used for a type of forward air control – depending on the combat scenario and threat of ground fire. However, there were only three common types of specific FAC aircraft which fulfilled the total span of FAC duties.

These were the ***Cessna O-1 Bird Dog,*** the ***North American OV-10 Bronco*** and the ***Cessna O-2A***.

Cessna 0-1 *Bird Dog*



O-1 at Vung Tau

North American OV-10 *Bronco*

OV-10 Revetment at Phan Rang

Cessna O-2A *Oscar Deuce*

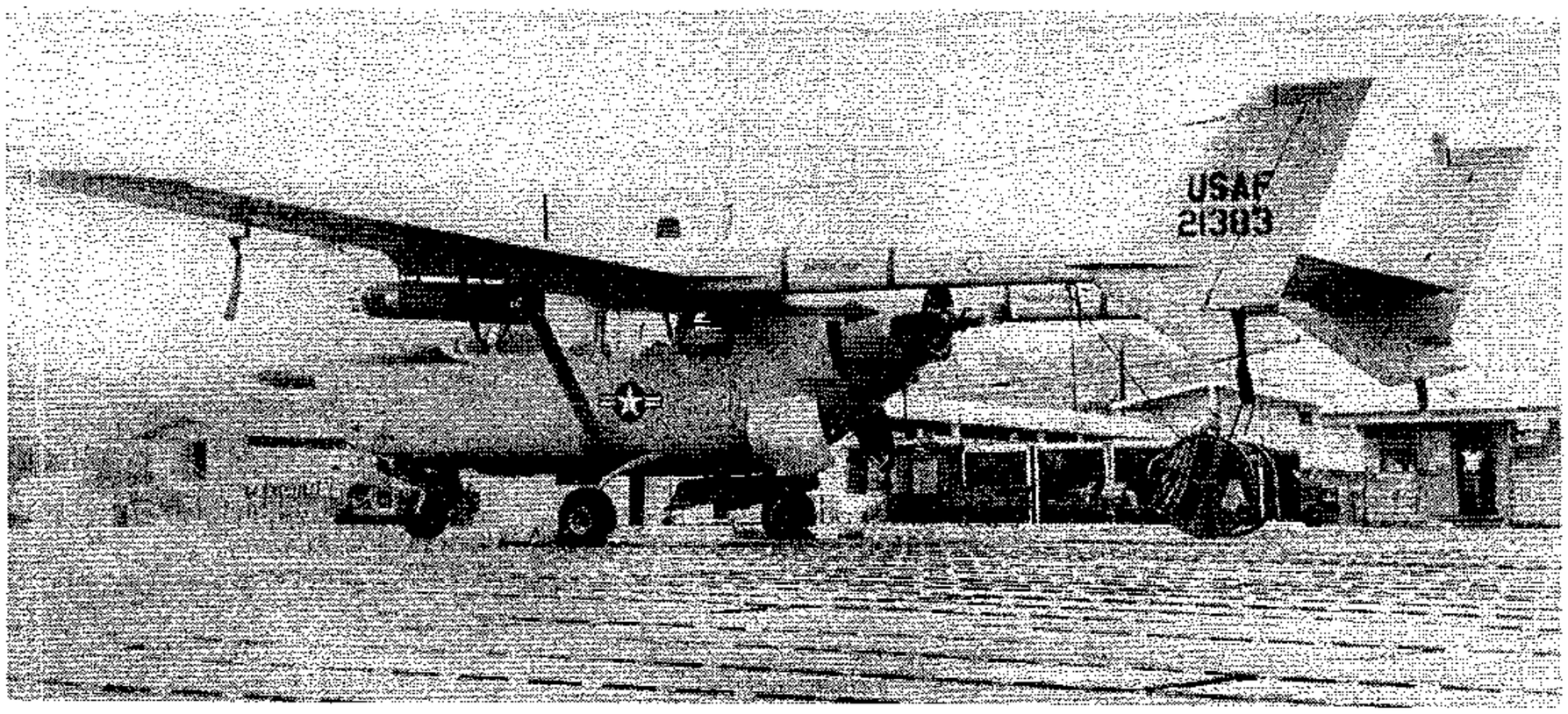
When the Bird Dog was to be replaced in military service, it was felt that a higher performance aircraft was needed – for survival against small arms ground fire. The ability of the O-1 to loiter lowly and slowly, and spot targets between the trees, was sacrificed for survivability. The FAC had to fly higher and faster and to redress this, in safer areas, the FAC was used in conjunction with a Light Observation Helicopter.

When hostilities broke out in South Vietnam, it was only intended that a small number of 0-1s would be used to support the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) but when the war escalated, it was clear that more and higher performance aircraft were going to be needed – and needed ASAP!

The USAF had previously held a competition for a COIN (Counter Insurgency) aircraft capable of multiple missions, including light Close Air Support, para-dropping, medevac, surveillance and light attack against small marine craft. The OV-10 Bronco had been chosen to assume the FAC role – but they were not yet available in sufficient numbers.

Thus the O-2 was born – but it was born nameless. I am not sure why. Most USAF aircraft, although known by their designation, e.g. F-4, C-130, B-52, still had a full name, ***Phantom, Hercules or Stratofortress***. As a result, the O-2 was called, variously, ***Oscar Deuce, Push-me-pull-you, Superdog*** and the civil name of ***Super Skymaster*** became ***Super Mixmaster*** or, simply, ***Mixmaster***.

The O-2 was a development of the civilian Cessna 337 (Super Skymaster) which offered the safety and performance of a twin-engine aircraft without the penalty of control problems in the event of an engine failure. It was a radical, but very effective, design.

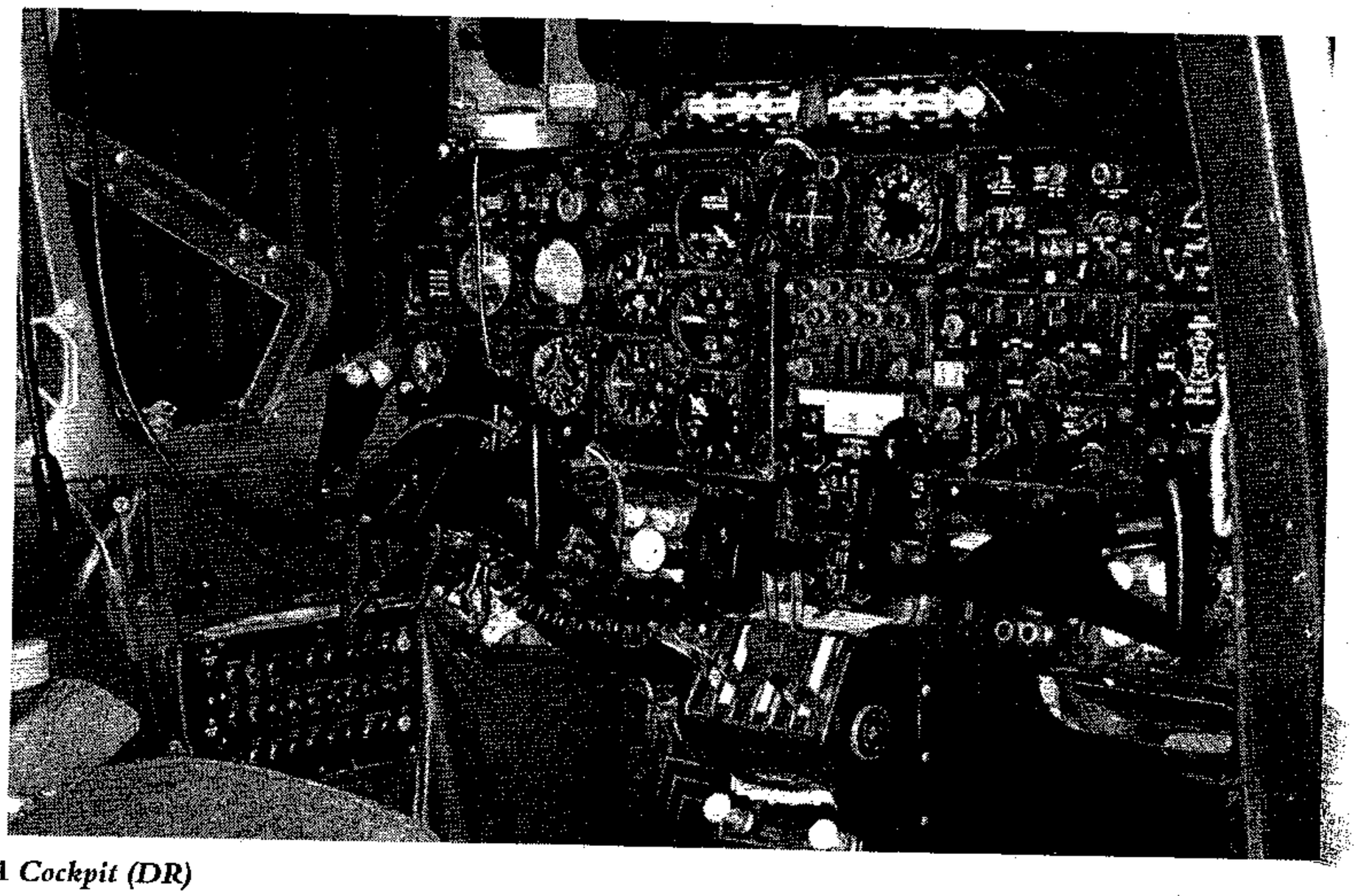


O-2A at Vung Tau (RAAF Museum)

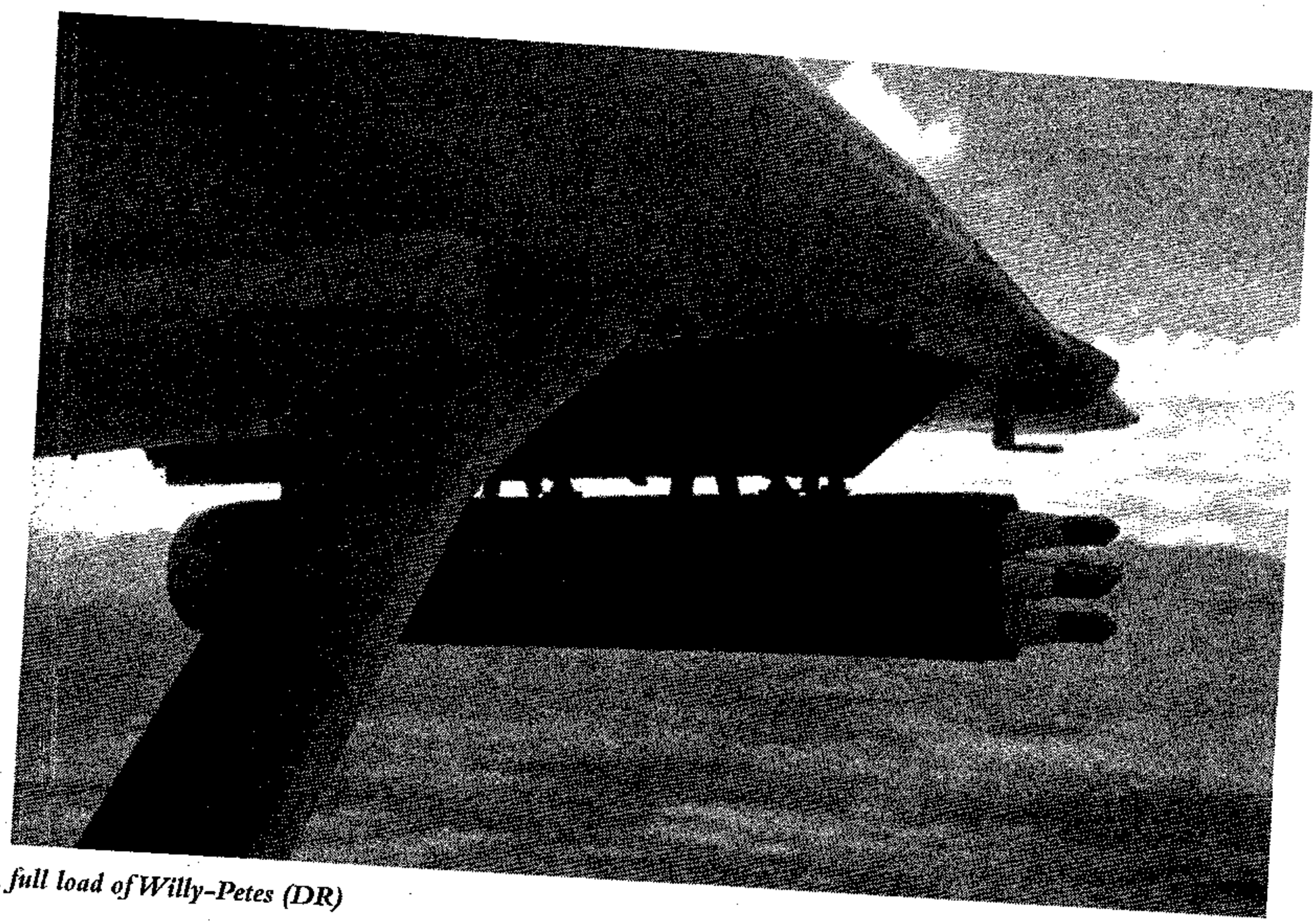
Jade O-2s at Vung Tau (DR)

Despite the inevitable comparisons of speed and firepower, we need to remember the roles th the O-2 was to fulfill – reconnaissance, communications, target-marking, command and cor trol and direction of fire support. The 0-2 had five radios to talk to the troops, the fighters, h base, radar control – as well as tactical navigation and electronic identification equipment.

It had a weapons sight (although the chinagraph mark on the windshield still came in handy). had good field-of-view, especially up and left, where the FAC could see his fighters, and dow and left, where he could see his target. It had four under-wing hard points which could eac carry rocket pods, flares or mini-guns.



0-2A Cockpit (DR)



A full load of Willy-Petes (DR)

It had good transit speed, two engines and some armor protection for the pilot. Sure it was underpowered (actually overweight) but it did the job well. It didn't have ejection seats and I am not sure if anyone ever bailed out of an O-2 – but what more could you ask of this little airplane?

History of this O-2 – Serial Number 67-21368

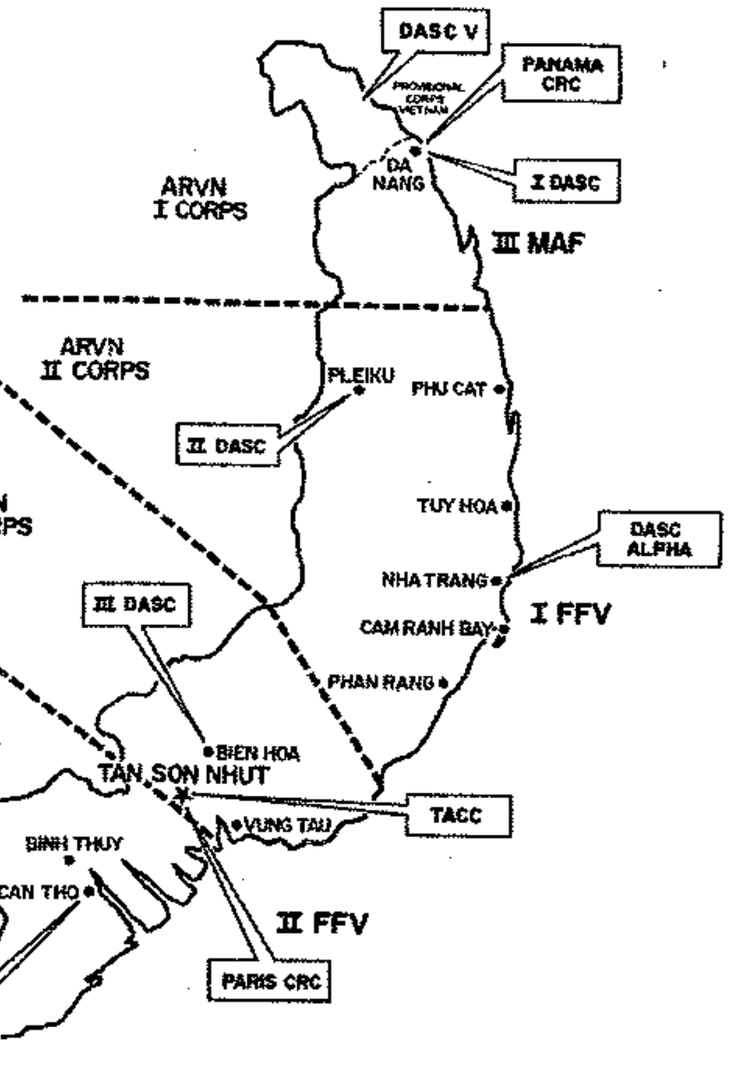
This particular aircraft was built in 1967 by the Cessna corporation in Wichita, Kansas. It was delivered to the USAF in August of that year.

South East Asia was ***hot*** at that time and, without delay, '368' was assigned to the Seventh Air Force and deployed to Nakhom Phanom (NKP) in North Eastern Thailand, right next to the Mekong River, the border with Laos.

In February 1968, the aircraft was relocated to Da Nang air base in South Vietnam near the ancient capital of Hue and, in November of that year, re-assigned to the 504th Tactical Air Support Group at Bien Hoa, 15 miles north-east of Saigon.

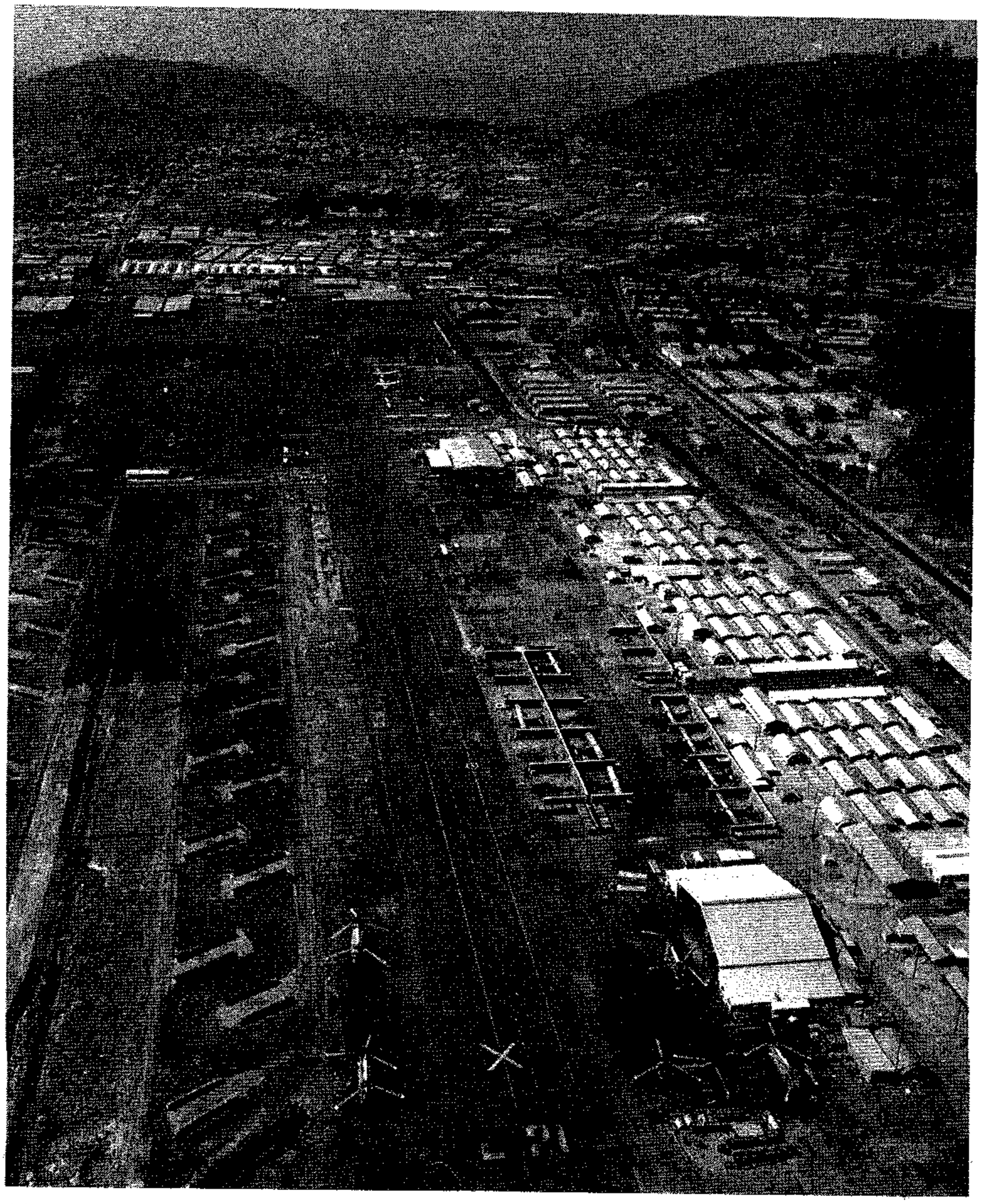
By then, the 504th TASG was responsible for all in-country FAC operations, and squadrons were assigned to each of the four military regions of South Vietnam. Saigon and Bien Hoa were in 3 Corps and the squadron responsible for this district was the 19th Tactical Air Support Squadron. Also at Bien Hoa was the Direct Air Support Centre which assigned *(fragged)* pre-planned airstrikes and close air support resources and prioritized air support for hot situations. Troops in Contact (TIC) with the enemy were always given top priority. The major maintenance base for all the FAC aircraft was also at Bien Hoa.

The region of 3 Corps extended from the Mekong river to the north-west (the Cambodia border), to the Mekong Delta (4 Corps) to the south-west, the South China Sea to the south east and to the mountains running inland from Phan Thiet on the coast.



The strategic division of South Vietnam into Corps areas

In 1969 and 1970, 368 served in 3 Corps at Vung Tau and Nui Dat and spent much time as guardian angel for the 1st Australian Task Force in Phuoc Tuy province – south east of Saigon and Bien Hoa. The primary airfield was Vung Tau but many operations were from the forward airfield at Nui Dat – headquarters of the Task Force.



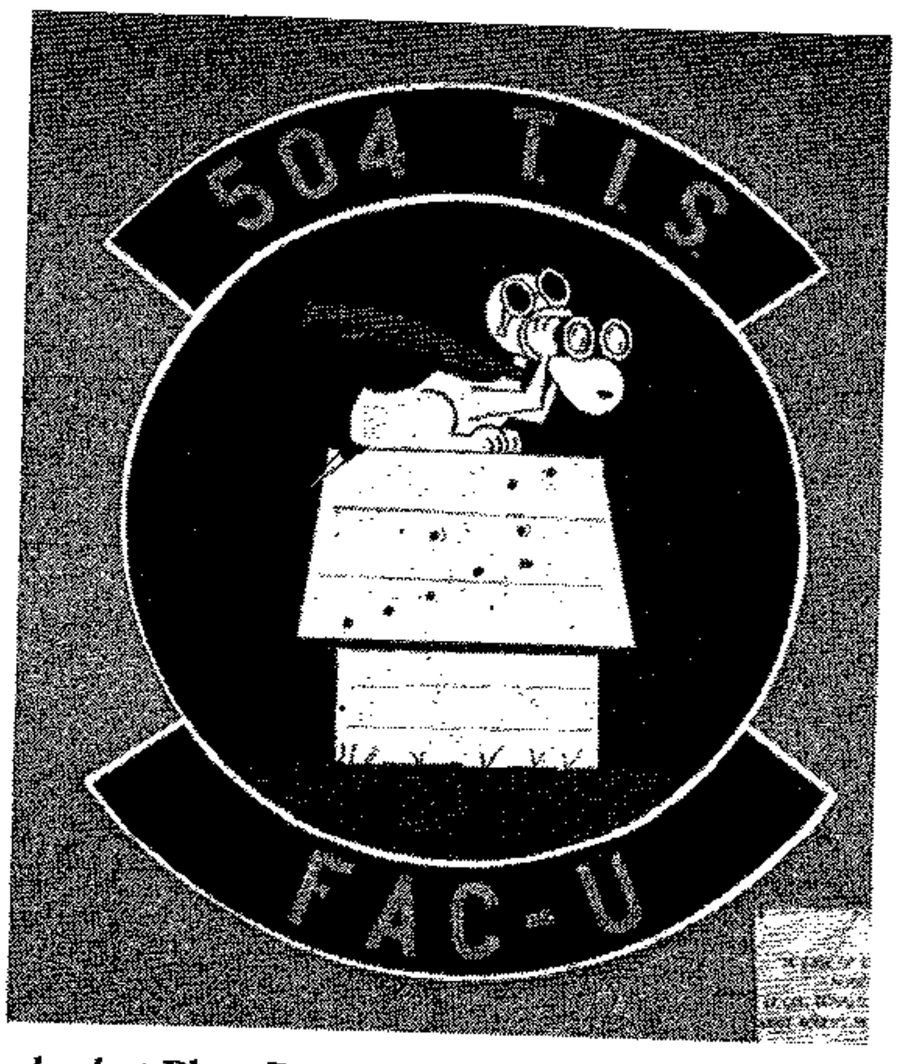
Vung Tau airfield 1969 – (the runway shown is a taxiway – the new runway was to the left of the picture). This was mid-day with most of the Caribous, Chinooks and Otters out on missions.

Our tarmac was pierced aluminum planking with non-skid paint – positioned in the upper tre of the photo. Vung Tau was 'home' to 368 and her sisters.

21368 – armed and ready at Vung Tau – despite the rain and the night

The Aussies have a special regard for this O-2 aircraft. Her callsign was ***Jade***. Her mission h was dedicated to support the 1st Australian Task Force.

Charles Shultz's ***Snoopy,*** had been adopted generally as the FAC emblem.



Insignia of the in-country FAC school at Phan Rang

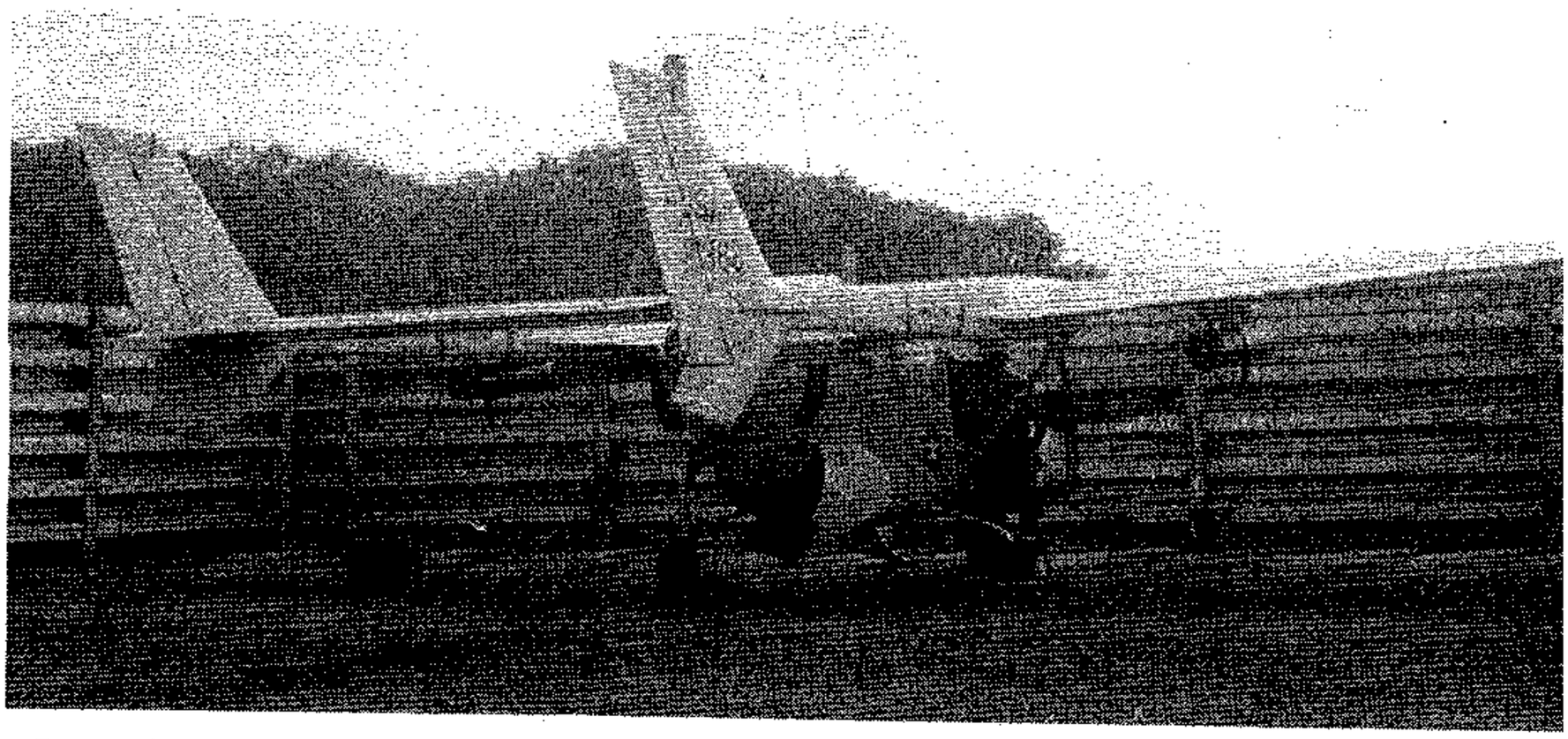
The Jade aircraft carried an extra marking – Snoopy was given a kangaroo on which to ride and he carried a willy-pete rocket over his shoulder.

Snoopy on his 'Roo carrying his willy-pete (Courtesy: Australian War Memorial)

It was a battle to keep the logo as the aircraft were returned for servicing at Bien Hoa, a
Colonel insisted that the kangaroos were removed. Sometimes we had to be a little devio

Snoopy and his Kangaroo on the fin of 972 (DR)

Six to eight FACs were assigned to support the Australian Task Force which consisted of
Infantry Battalions, Artillery, Army Aviation and a Base Hospital. Royal Australian Air
(RAAF) helicopter and transport squadrons also supported the Task Force. The Jade FACs
regular USAF FACs in a USAF squadron – the 19th Tactical Air Support Squadron. We
based at Vung Tau with the squadron headquarters at Bien Hoa. Many missions were flown
the Australian base camp at Nui Dat, which had its own airfield called ***Luscombe Field***.



368 at Luscombe Field, Nui Dat (DR)

310 at Luscombe Field – with kangaroo (Courtesy: Australian War Memorial)

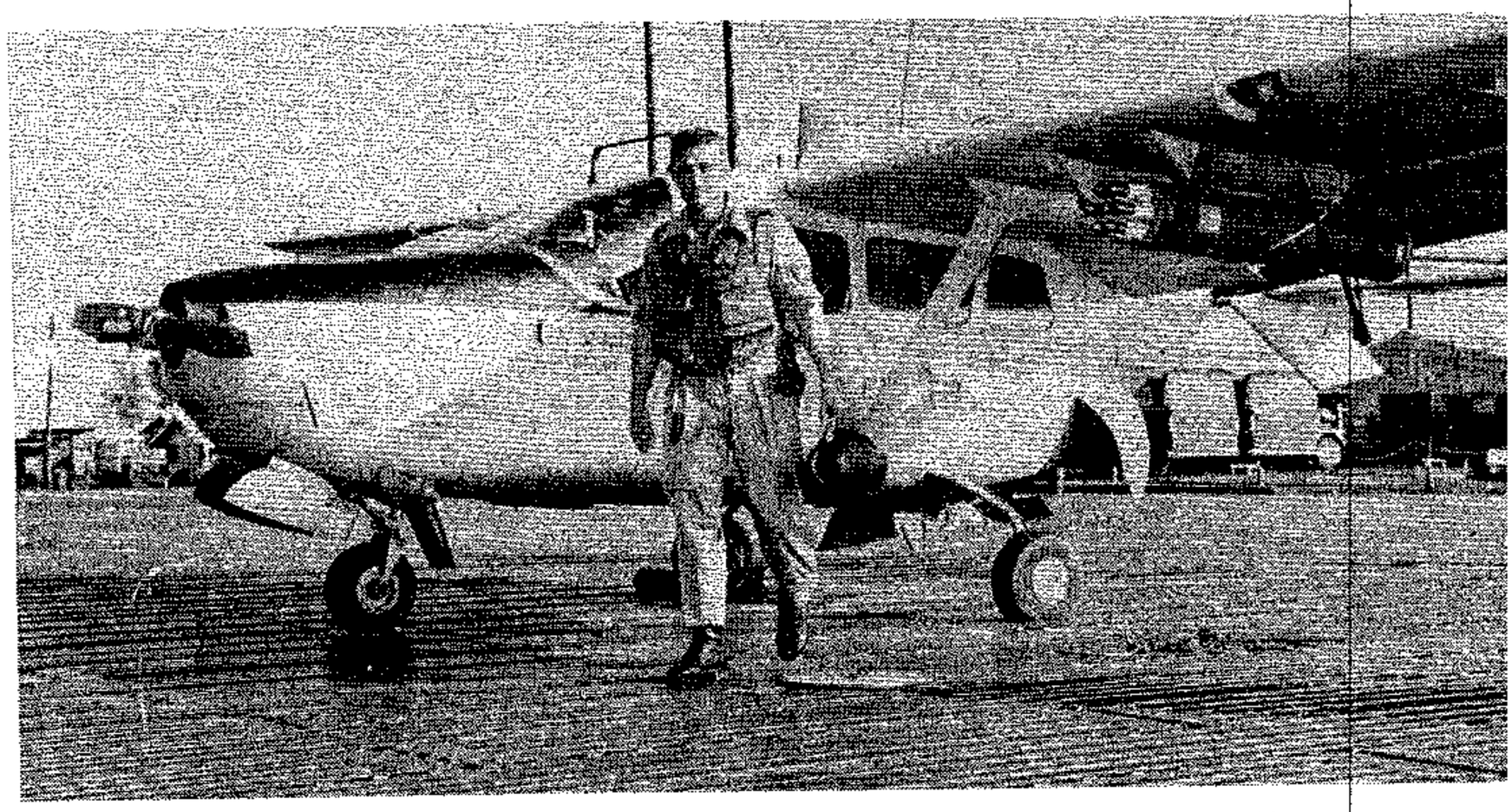
Jade – Christmas 1969

The role of the FAC was only possible through his lines of communications and his mainte
nance support. Jade relied on its team of pilots, maintenance personnel and radio operators. W
had a radio shack at Nui Dat, managed by Sgt. Bob Curci, and a mobile Tactical Air Contr
Party (some party!) from our FAC jeep – which was used for occasional off-base deploymen
with the troops.

Jade FAC Jeep at Fire Support Base Barbara – 1969 (DR)

Within the Jade unit here was also one Aussie FAC, an experienced fighter pilot, wh assigned to this unit. Callsign ***Jade 07*** was reserved for this pilot.

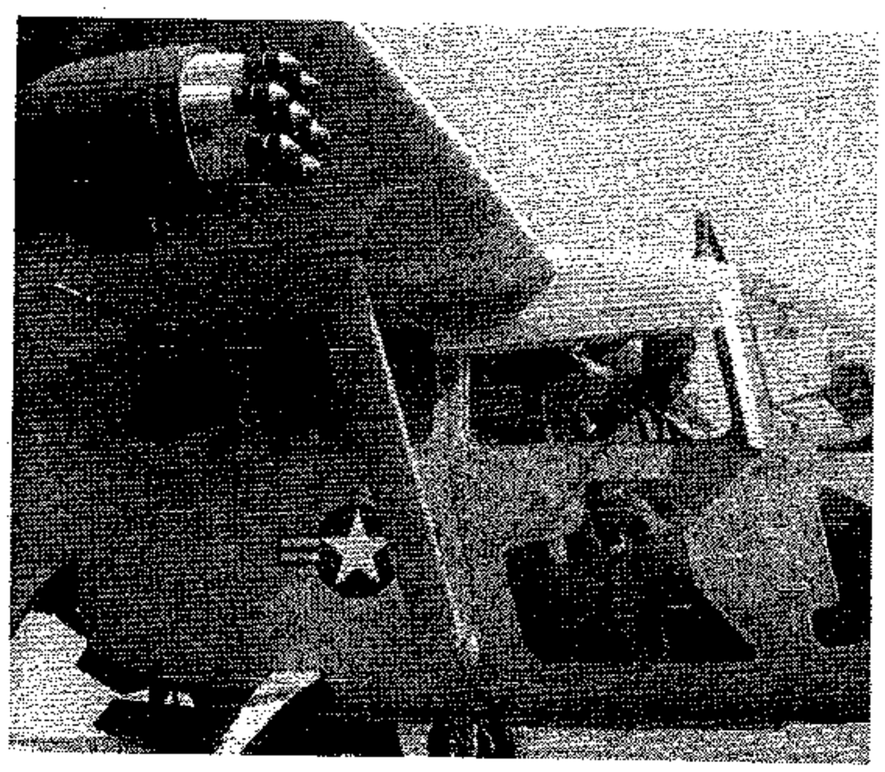
At one point, for three months, we also had an Aussie ALO (Air Liaison Officer) – Wing mander Pete Larard, callsign ***Jade 01***. He flew twenty-plus missions in 368.



Wing Commander Pete Larard – Jade 01 – ALO (Courtesy: RAAF Museum, Point Cook)

Flight Lieutenant Barry Schulz, from South Australia, flew 16 missions in 368 during for a total of 29 hours and 10 minutes (during which time he unofficially claimed the ir try, high altitude record for an O-2A, of 14,700 feet!).

From my information, the greatest number of missions in 368 were flown by Captain Chris Neale, USAF. Chris flew 78 missions in 368 in support of the Australian Task Force. I personally flew several missions with him – including night strikes – one of which was very (very) memorable.



Captain Chris Neale in 368 (DR)

A Day in the Life of '368'

I had the honor to spend 8 months as Jade 07 and to fly 67 missions in 368. One notable day was in August of 1969.

A platoon from 5 Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (5 RAR) was on a search-and-destroy mission about 20 'klicks' (kilometers) north-east of the Nui Thi Vai mountains in Phuoc Tuy province. A patrol hit upon a bunker system and was soon head to head in a firefight with the unfriendlies. They went to ground and called for air support.

I was scrambled for an immediate task – Troops in Contact. I knew the operation and the planned dispersion of friendlies but this was a recce and positions weren't clearly delineated.

The pre-flight was simple and quick. The airplane was ready to go – armed with two pods, each of 7 willy-petes. I donned my flak vest. I was already wet with sweat in the humid air and the parachute (for morale?) made matters worse. I placed my M-16 on the rear floor and my bag of maps next to the pilot's seat. I could find my way as accurately as any orienteer.

Start, taxi and take-off were normal although the wet taxiway matting (PAP) was a little worn and slippery in places. It was only 10 minutes to the rendezvous. The fighters had been given a TACAN radial and distance for the rendezvous and, while I was still in transit, I contacted the fighters, checked their ordnance and gave them their safe ejection and escape routes.

We had requested immediate air support and were assigned two consecutive flights of fighters – Air National Guard F-100s with high drags, unfinned napalm and 20 mike-mike (20 mm cannon). (I loved to get those Guard guys – they could hit what you wanted them to – reliably.) Next was a flight of F-4s with more high drags.

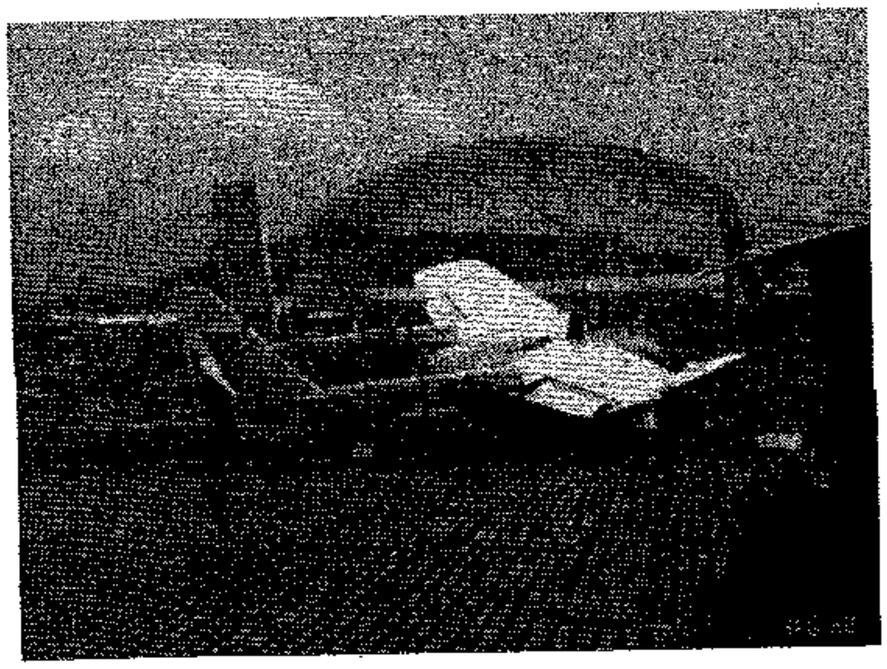
The troops were supported by intense mortar fire and did not want to stop their fire support. It was usual procedure to keep the fighters and the FAC over the friendly side of the battle but, in this case, they, and I, agreed to stay over the enemy side so that the mortars could keep firing. We had a pair of 'Bushrangers' (Aussie UH-1H gunships) in close support waiting for the VC to run from cover – also on the unfriendly side.

Muzzle flashes of ground fire were visible through the jungle canopy and the troops warned me of more g fire as I orbited and marked the positions. It got fairly hot from the intensity of concentration and the wor

For nearly two hours, 368, and I, orbited the position, briefed and controlled the fighters and gunshi cleared the mortar fire. I used the full load of 14 willy-petes and all my fuel.

The air support had to be placed down to 75 metres from friendlies. Confirmed Bomb Damage Asse included their collapsed bunker system, clothing, documents – and VC casualties, Killed By Air. The gi caught several more, as the unfriendlies tried to retreat from the area.

Some O-2s didn't make it. This one was ***wheelbarrowed*** to death.



As well as marking targets, we tried to ease the pain on the civilian population. This you is Vanh with her 'brothers' at the Ba Ria orphanage. I hope she made it through the war.

After the war, 368 was assigned to several Air National Guard units, back home in the her activities during this time are unknown. She was then retired to storage and, thanl efforts of the restoration team, is proudly preserved here in the FAC memorial park.

This memorial is important for us and our future generations – to remember and to re

Dedication

A total of 544 O-2s was manufactured, in various versions. Many were lost – 22 in acc in combat (3 to Surface-to-Air Missiles). They achieved a wonderful record – for wh interim airplane! I would like to dedicate this poem to the O-2, to the people who bu those who maintained her and to all the FACs who flew her.

Ode to an O-2

Tail-dragging
Bird Dogs
aptly named
to point the way
ground hugging
flutter-bugging
sparrow-like
between the trees.
Hawkish OV-10s
blasting, bursting, bucking, Broncos
blazing guns and smoking dives.
But best I recall
and relate to you
my push-me-pull-you
Oscar Two.
Nameless, fameless,
elegant but ugly too
its duck-like legs
dangling briefly
before it flew
double-buzzing
about its vital task.
This ugly duckling
did its job
well and truly too.
There were times
when I too
had to push and pull,
my Oscar Two
and never once
did you let me down
my push-me-pull-you
Oscar Two
Thank you.

Conclusion

This memorial is dedicated to the many FACs who didn't come home – as well as those that did. We hope that it will keep alive their memories and their names, in your hearts and in your thoughts.

Let's hope they will never be needed again – but, of course, they will, in one form or another – and, when they are, they will be ready to serve, proudly, once more.

FACs – In Memoriam

by David Robson

They were young
not yet wise
but clear
in what
was right
and what was fair.
They knew that they
in their little gray planes
could cover their troops
with a mantle of care
their presence alone
enough to deter
even the worst
of what was there.
They did their duty
their duty of care
eyes in the sky
ears of the air.
Neither painted for war
nor painted for show
uncamouflaged
they were
ringmasters of the greatest show on earth
small, gray,
guardians
alone, and unarmed
with unlimited power
aerial shields
aerial swords
accurate, immediate, fatal.
How do they count
those analysts of war
account, amount,
and total the score,
compile and record
their statistical war?
BDA, KIA, MIA, KBA.
What does it mean?
What does it matter?
What matters
above all
is the unknown number
of unknown soldiers
who didn't fall

and why,
decades later
still enjoy
the love
of their families,
the pleasure of friends
the smell of spring
and the song of the wind
purely because
those little gray planes
were there
whenever,
and
wherever,
they were needed.
God bless them.

Most FACs came back. Many did not. Some were heroes. Some were not. All were there, then, when, and where, they were needed. This memorial is to all – but especially to those whose names are recorded here – those that fell in combat. These FACs gave their all – without hesitation.

The greatest human sacrifice is to give your life for your comrades

This memorial is dedicated to the 219 FACs who did just that.

Remember they who have gone before – as FACs always have.

This memorial honors those young heroes.

Amen