

WINGS AND WRENCHES:
THE HISTORY OF THE 6TH AIR COMMANDO SQUADRON

1967 TO 1969

A Thesis

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By

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Abstract

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This thesis examines the history of a United States Air Force fighter squadron created during the Vietnam War. It focuses on the circumstances prior to the squadron's creation, the selection of what was considered to be an obsolete propeller driven aircraft, the teamwork established between the men who flew the aircraft into war, and those who provided round-the-clock maintenance support seven days a week.

The demands of fighting a counter-insurgency war placed unforeseen pressure and unexpected calls for close air support for friendly ground forces engaged with a determined enemy. The study of the 6th Air Commando Squadron during the Vietnam War is an excellent example of how the American military adapted to a tasking for which it had not planned for. It brings insight into the success of the American individual and the concept of teamwork. By understanding the 6th Air Commando Squadron and its accomplishments during the Vietnam War, an understanding can be gained on how important teamwork is to success.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: Introduction	1
Chapter Two: The Douglas Skyraider	7
Chapter Three: Transition From Peace to War	22
Chapter Four: Operation Prairie Fire	46
Chapter Five: What Are Your Intentions?	70
Chapter Six: Mayday! . . . Mayday!	91
Chapter Seven: Challenges	109
Chapter Eight: Conclusion	132
Bibliography	139

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

During the 1960s, the Cold War pitted the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact against the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The Soviet Union dominated Eastern Europe and influenced the United States to maintain a “Europe-First” military and political strategy. The Europe-first theme was held over from World War II and continued against the threat of Soviet expansion. As the Soviet Union maintained a large military force and developed improved modern fighters and bombers, the United States faced a possible direct challenge in Europe. How to counter this threat led to constant reviews, political decisions, and for the military, improvements of American weapon system capabilities.

Concern over growing Soviet military capabilities resulted in the United States’ decision to modernize its air forces with technologically advanced jet-powered aircraft. Improvements in jet propulsion allowed the design and manufacture of more advanced and efficient weapons systems. The higher speed of jet aircraft was believed to offer better combat performance, especially in the interceptor role against the growing fleet of Soviet fighters and bombers. World War II and Korea had dramatically shown the advantages of jet-powered aircraft. The air arms of the United States military (Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, and Navy) all requested jet-powered aircraft to meet their needs. In most cases each air branch established specifications for aircraft without consideration of possible needs of the other services. The immediate goal: replace propeller with jet-powered aircraft. Where the Soviet military had superiority in number of weapon systems, the United States depended on technology to offset numbers. However, technology placed an enormous strain on national defense budgets. As new aircraft designs and

more powerful engines entered military service, costs associated with development increased dramatically.¹

Air Force senior leaders lobbied Congress for funding to purchase the new Century series fighters, new bombers, and cargo transports, all jet powered.² First generation jet fighters, such as the Republic F-84 Thunderjet, North American F-86 Saber, and Northrup F-89 Scorpion, were considered obsolete. They were to be replaced by second generation aircraft—North American F-100 Super Sabers, McDonnell F-101 Voodoos, Convair F-102 Delta Dagger, Lockheed F-104 Star fighters and the Republic F-105 Thunderchiefs. Replacements for the remaining propeller powered Mustang, Superfortress, Dakota, Globemaster and Cargomaster aircraft were in development or under production contract.³

As the United States maintained its focus on Europe and its aircraft modernization program, unfolding events in Southeast Asia began to influence both political and military thinking. The growing concern about possible Communist influence in the western Pacific reignited American concerns dormant since the Korean War. The Pacific theater had been overshadowed by the Europe-first plan, but the success of Communist backed forces raised concerns. With the Korean War and the French defeat in Indo-China, American political leadership beginning with the Eisenhower administration began military assistance to the area. As the United States became involved in Southeast Asia, increased demands were placed on the military. These new demands affected both the Europe-first and jet modernization strategy.⁴

¹ AF Pamphlet 190-1. *Questions & Answers About Your United States Air Force*. Published by Order of the Secretary of the Air Force, Jack R. Benson, Colonel, USAF, Director of Administration, dated 15 July 1974, (Hereinafter referred to as AFP 190-1 and page number.), 7.

² AFP 190-1, 36.

³ AFP 190-1, 12.

⁴ AFP 190-1, 35.

American leaders expressed concerns over growing Communist influence in North Vietnam and guerilla fighting in South Vietnam. They feared that if Communist tactics succeeded in South Vietnam, neighboring Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand could follow. The possible subsequent military basing of a growing Soviet blue-water navy posed a direct threat that the United States could not ignore. It created the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) to organize the growing military involvement in Southeast Asia and gave assistance to South Vietnam in the form of military equipment, training, and, at first, small groups of advisors. The fledgling South Vietnamese Air Force was equipped with retired Navy Grumman Bearcat fighters, North American T-28 Trojan trainers, Curtis C-46 Commando, and Douglas C-47 Skytrain cargo transports, as well as Douglas Skyraiders. However, it became apparent that advisors and equipment alone would not be adequate. After the Gulf of Tonkin Incident in August 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson committed American armed forces to the fight.⁵

In one Southeast Asian nation, modernization of American military and political needs resulted in a conceptual conflict. The nation was South Vietnam and the demands for counter-insurgency warfare came into conflict with the Air Force's drive to modernize its aircraft for a potential air war in Europe. Aircraft built to support the Europe-first strategy were designed to intercept enemy air formations, establish total air superiority over the battlefield, and only then provide close air support to friendly forces by engaging enemy assault and tank formations. The primary role was to intercept and eliminate the enemy's air force. Leadership concentrated on the interceptor role at the expense of the close air support capabilities, for which modern jet-powered aircraft were found to be ill-equipped. Demands from ground forces for close air

⁵ AFP 190-1, 36.

support necessitated that the Air Force provide close air support aircraft or allow the United States Army to re-establish its own air arm.⁶

These factors became the foundation for establishing the United States Air Force's 6th Air Commando Squadron, equipped with propeller aircraft that service leadership was trying to replace. The story of the 6th Air Commando Squadron during the Vietnam War demonstrated that in the right hands, the seemingly obsolete propeller powered aircraft could successfully prosecute an air campaign against a resolute enemy. The 6th Air Commando Squadron was created in October 1967 and equipped with the Douglas Skyraider expressly for the counter-insurgency conflict in Southeast Asia. Air operations utilized the Skyraider's assets: varied ordnance capabilities, tremendous load capacities, pinpoint accuracy, and long endurance.⁷

The unit's success was due as much to the people who became part of the squadron as to its aircraft. The squadron was a self-sustained unit with individuals specifically trained on the Skyraider.⁸ The squadron pilots flew and held staff positions responsible for command, intelligence, maintenance, munitions, and supply. Enlisted personnel held administrative, maintenance, and logistic positions. Once established in Southeast Asia, the unit was self supporting, possessing the resources and skills needed to support and maintain offensive air operations in a wartime environment.

From the beginning, the 6th Air Commando Squadron faced adversity and challenge. The men of the squadron came together and succeeded under diverse circumstances. Most received Skyraider training through the Air Forces' maintenance and pilot training programs. Decisions that affected the squadron were made without their input, but they never balked at completing

⁶ AFP 190-1, 27-27.

⁷ AFP 190-1, 11.

⁸ AFP 190-1, 11. [The term squadron designated an Air Force unit built around approximately eighteen aircraft.]

missions given to them. When combat roles changed, squadron personnel collaborated to meet the challenge. Pilots and maintainers worked closely together to get the job done. When a pilot failed to return, the loss was felt by all.⁹ Even forty years later, squadron members remember the fallen and for all “They are not forgotten.”¹⁰

The historiography of this unit is somewhat difficult to trace. The USAF 6th Air Commando Squadron historical records are incomplete at best. While the squadron is currently an active duty unit, its history office has little Vietnam War information. There are incomplete “Histories” of the squadron and parent wing, but they do not provide a complete and accurate story of the squadron. Missing from most historical records are the enlisted maintainers’ accounts and stories. These individuals often worked twelve-hour days seven days a week and provided the aircraft for the pilots to complete the missions scheduled each day. Unit historians, however, concentrated exclusively on air operations: missions flown, targets destroyed, and enemy killed. Little is recorded of what occurred outside the Skyraider cockpit. The maintainer story is a critical part of the squadron history.

Scholars generally tend to concentrate on the complete war and pass over individual small units. Even so there are some excellent works on the Skyraider and the air role in Vietnam. George J. Marrett’s *Cheating Death: Combat Air Rescues in Vietnam and Laos* carefully explains combat from the Skyraider pilot’s perspective.¹¹ Another well written work is Rick Newman and Don Sheppard’s *Bury Us Upside Down: The Misty Pilots and the Secret Battle for the Ho Chi Minh Trail*. This work explains the extreme difficulty incurred trying to

⁹ Author’s recollections.

¹⁰ AFP 190-1, 36.

¹¹ George J. Marrett, *Cheating Death: Combat Air Rescues in Vietnam and Laos* (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2003).

stop the flow of North Vietnamese war materials and forces into South Vietnam.¹² One of the best Skyraider works is Wayne Mutza's *The A-1 Skyraider in Vietnam: The Spad's Last War*. The work is thorough and provides excellent information on the aircraft, pilots, and maintainers. There are some minor errors, but it is an excellent beginning for those who want to understand the aircraft, people, and missions during the Vietnam War.¹³

A large part of the primary material about the history of the 6th Air Commando Squadron was obtained from past unit members in the form of oral history. Both pilots and maintainers provided insight and recollections about the squadron. Some provided information from their personal war time flight logs, others from notes and letters, and all provided a verbal description of the squadron that is not recorded in what unit histories are available during the two years of the units Vietnam operations and existence. The aim of this thesis is to show how a small USAF aircraft squadron used an outdated aircraft to accomplish their mission during the Vietnam War. Their story helps provide insight into the unique character of the American military.

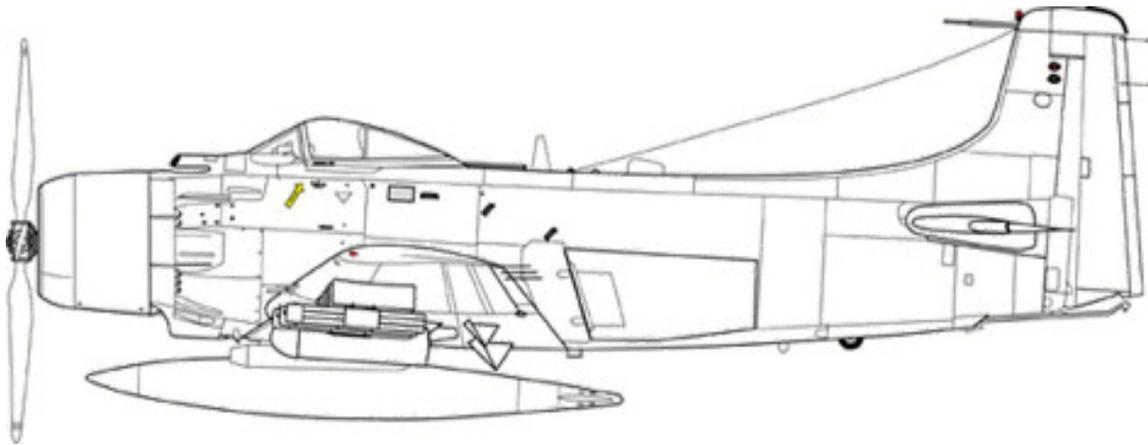
¹² Rick Newman and Don Sheppard, *Bury Us Upside Down: The Misty Pilots and the Secret Battle for the Ho Chi Minh Trail* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006).

¹³ Wayne Mutza, *The A-1 Skyraider in Vietnam: The Spad's Last War* (Atglen: Schiffer Military History, 2003).

CHAPTER TWO

THE DOUGLAS SKYRAIDER

The Douglas Corporation Skyraider was a throwback to the age of propeller driven aircraft. It was designed at the end of World War II to meet demanding naval wartime requirements. Developed too late for that war, the Skyraider proved itself during the Korean War where Navy and Marine Corps pilots flew it extensively in ground attack missions. The Skyraider could carry almost any weapon in the military's inventory and put ordnance on target accurately.¹⁴ It flew "low and slow" and remained on station for long periods without having to refuel. The aircraft was well designed and could absorb a great amount of battle damage. It was easy to fly and offered the pilot an excellent view.¹⁵ The Skyraider was an easy aircraft to maintain and represented the best to the flyers and the maintainers.¹⁶



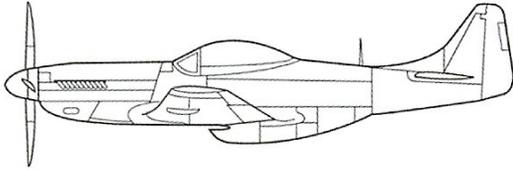
Side view of the single-seat Douglas Skyraider.

¹⁴ NAVAXR 1335A, *Standard Aircraft Characteristics* Revised, No author provided, June 30, 1957. (Hereinafter referred to as NAVAXR and page number.)

¹⁵ James D. Reeves, Lieutenant Colonel. USAF. Telephone interview by author and correspondence package sent from Littleton, Colorado, April 8, 2009. (The package *The Life and Times of James D. Reeves* had been written in order to answer his family's questions about his life. Hereinafter referred to as Reeves and page number.), 47.

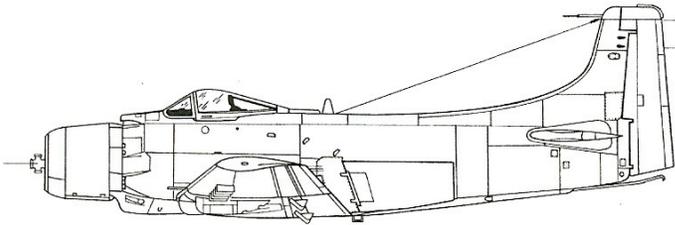
¹⁶ O. E. (Stretch) Ballmes, Captain USAF. Interview by author, Fort Walton Beach, Florida, August 6, 2009. (Hereinafter referred to as Ballmes interview.)

AIRCRAFT SIZE COMPARISONS



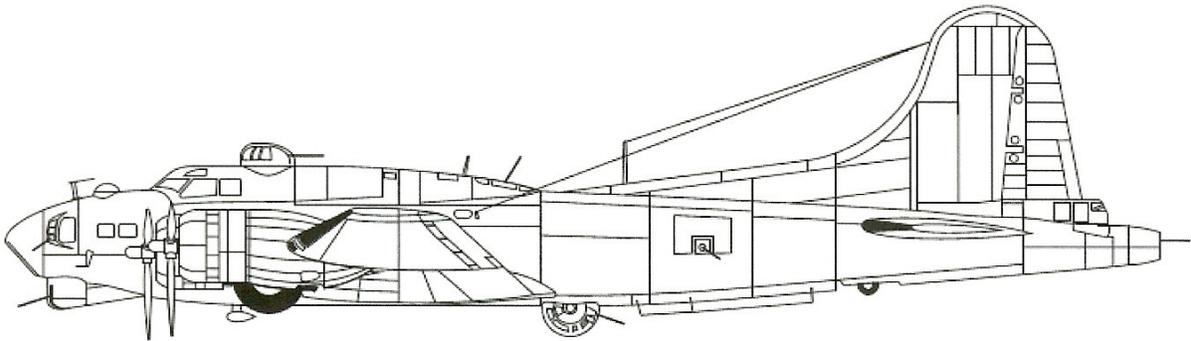
The North American P-51D

Length	32 ft 3 in
Wingspan	37 ft 0 in
Height	13 ft 8 in
Empty Weight	7,635 lbs
Max Takeoff Weight	12,100 lbs
Crew	1



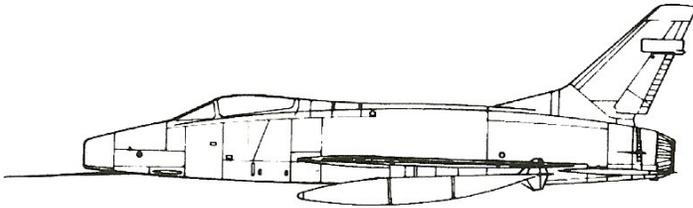
The Douglas A1-H

Length	38 ft 10 in
Wingspan	50 ft 1/4 in
Height	15 ft 8 1/4 in
Empty Weight	11,968 lbs
Max Takeoff Weight	25,000 lbs
Crew	1



The Boeing B-17G

Length	74 ft 4 in	Wingspan	103 ft 9 in
Height	19 ft 1 in	Empty Weight	36,135 lbs
Max Takeoff Weight	65,500 lbs	Crew	10



The North American F-100

Length	50 ft	Wingspan	38 ft 9 in
Height	16 ft 2 3/4 in	Empty Weight	21,000 lbs
Max Takeoff Weight	34,832 lbs	Crew	1

Most who first observed the Skyraider thought it something from the past. It looked like a contradiction in design, especially to those who flew or maintained the newer, sleeker jet aircraft. The Skyraider was always dirty with large exhaust stains on the fuselage sides.¹⁷

The Skyraider was designed in the later part of World War II as a replacement for the Douglas Dauntless scout/dive bomber and Grumman Avenger torpedo bomber.¹⁸ Douglas Aircraft Company and designer Edward H. Heinemann proposed the plane in answer to a United States Navy request for a carrier-based, single engine, long range, high performance dive bomber aircraft. The Navy wanted a low wing, all metal, single engine, single place land attack aircraft.¹⁹ In competition with Boeing, Curtis, Kaiser, and Martin Aircraft Companies, Douglas created the prototype that became the Skyraider. The plane was powered by a Wright Aeronautical R-3350 Cyclone engine equipped with an Aeroproducts 13.5-foot diameter, four blade, variable pitch, constant speed hollow steel propeller.²⁰ The 18-cylinder engine produced approximately 2,700 horsepower at maximum power settings. It had a single stage, two speed super charger and a Stromberg PR58U1 carburetor with a spinner injection system.²¹ The engine, after developmental problems (in-flight fires) in the Boeing B-29 Superfortress, powered

¹⁷ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, NATOPS Flight Manual, Navy Model A-1H and A-1J Aircraft, March 15, 1965. (Hereinafter referred to as NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1 and page number.), [Page numbering in military manuals is normally designated 1-1. In this example the page is in Part I, and page 2.), 1-2. (Authors Note: NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1 Flight Manual was eventually replaced by USAF Technical Order TO 1A-1E-1. Both flight manuals contained the same basic information, but the Air Force version omitted all naval terms and naval procedures. It added the new Air Force specific radios and the Yankee Extraction System.)

¹⁸ AN 01-40ALC-2. Erection and Maintenance Instructions. (Navy Models AD-4, AD-4N, AD-4Q Aircraft). Published under the Authority of the Secretary of the Air Force and the Chief of the Bureau of Aeronautics.) (Here afterward referred to as AN 01-40ALC-2.), May 1, 1952, 1. (Authors Note: AN 01-40ALF-2 Erection and Maintenance Instructions was eventually replaced by USAF Technical Order TO 1A-1E-2. Both manuals contained the same basic information.)

¹⁹ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 1-3.

²⁰ AN 01-40ALC-2, 7-8.

²¹ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 1-5.

many aircraft: the Lockheed Super G Constellation, Lockheed P-2 Neptune, Fairchild C-119F Flying Boxcar, and Douglas DC-7 (C-74 Globemaster) as well as the Skyraider.²²

The Skyraider's overall dimensions were impressive. It was an aluminum skinned low wing monoplane. The fuselage length was 39 feet, 2 and 3/4-inches and the vertical fin stood at 12 feet, 3/8-inches. The wingspan was 50 feet and 3/16-inches with the wing spread and 17 feet, 7 and 5/8-inches with the wing outer sections folded.²³

The Skyraider weighed 12,649 pounds empty and could carry approximately 8,800 pounds of ordnance.²⁴ By comparison, a World War II Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress typically carried a wartime bomb load of approximately 6,000 pounds.²⁵ This capability of carrying so much ordnance became the aircraft's chief strong point and helped ensure that the Skyraider was around to fight in Korea and Vietnam. Added was its flight endurance capability. The aircraft could fly missions lasting over six hours fully loaded without requiring refueling.²⁶

The Skyraider, designed as a carrier aircraft, had an arresting hook. The hook was a long metal tube with a specially-designed wedge shaped shoe at the end. During landings, the hook was lowered below the aircraft.²⁷ In this extended position, as the aircraft landed, the shoe snagged a heavy steel cable. Snagging the cable or trapping, stopped the aircraft in a very short distance, even if still airborne. More commonly referred to as the "tail hook," it was usually

²² NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 1-3/1-4.

²³ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, (Figure 1-2), 1-3/1-4.

²⁴ NAVAXR 1335A, Combat Loading Condition Chart.

²⁵ Edward Jablonski, *Flying Fortress: The Illustrated Biography of the B-17 and the Men Who Flew Them* (Garden City: Doubleday 1995), 203; and Roger Freeman *B-17: Flying Fortress* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1983), 29.

²⁶ NAVAXR 1335A, Performance Summary Chart.

²⁷ AN 01-40ALC-2, 1.

painted with alternating white and black bands. The hook was raised and lowered by hydraulic pressure and had an air back up emergency system.²⁸

The aircraft used aviation grade 115/145 octane fuel carried in a 380 gallon self-sealing tank located behind the cockpit. Three different auxiliary fuel tanks were used on Skyraiders. The term “drop tank” was more commonly used to describe the tanks, as they could be jettisoned or dropped in flight. The Aero 1A tanks were either 150 or 300 gallon capacity and the Mk 8 had a 300 gallon capacity.²⁹ The difference between tanks was aerodynamic shape: the Aero 1A was cylindrical with pointed ends and small fins at the rear while the Mk 8 tank was stubbier in appearance and had a lip where the top and bottom halves joined. Both tanks were carried on the centerline or inboard wing pylons. During jettison, the difference in tank shape became obvious to a pilot. The Aero 1A streamlined tank would “fly” off the aircraft while the stubbier Mk 8 tank would sometimes bump along the plane’s belly after being jettisoned.³⁰

The hydraulically actuated main landing gear retracted aft into the wing and into the fuselage for the tail gear.³¹ The main landing gear rotated the wheel, tire and brake assembly 90 degrees to fold flat into the wing. This rotation offered advantages, simple operation, great strength, and most importantly, reduced weight. This design met the Navy’s requirement for a strong gear that would absorb tremendous loads during carrier landings. The landing gear must have considerable strength to survive the repeated impact and high stress. The gear had a compressed air emergency extension system.³²

²⁸ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 1-30, Figure 3-7, Typical Carrier Landing Pattern, 3-30.

²⁹ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 1-61.

³⁰ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 1-74.

³¹ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 1-29.

³² NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 1-61.

The Wright R-3350 Cyclone had two rows of nine cylinders placed one behind the other and offset for better cooling. Horse power rating depended on model designation.³³ The R-3350 26 WAs provided 2,400 horsepower and later, the R-3350 26 WB produced 2,700 horsepower.³⁴ The Air Force standardized its Skyraiders with the 26 WB engine. Selecting one versus two engines reduced logistics support. The difference between the two R-3350s was explained by Donald S. Anklin, Fighter Factory General Manager. Anklin explained:

The 26 WB engine had been developed specifically to reduce vibrations from the 24 WA series engine in the aircraft. The Wright Company redesigned the crankshaft and master articulating rods making them much heavier. The increased size resulted in more power available to the pilot and the higher horsepower rating for the engine. The horsepower produced was impressive for an engine that weighed approximately 2,700-pounds or one horsepower per one pound of weight.³⁵

Besides being a powerful engine, the R-3350 was known for its ability to consume great quantities of oil and deposit oil residue everywhere behind the engine. The aircraft carried 36 gallons of oil, some of which stained the fuselage behind the engine exhaust stacks during flight. The caked-on residue formed wide streaks flowing aft towards the tail in a distinct pattern that followed the air flow curve over the wing. After a mission, oil would run down from different panels and drip off to the ground.³⁶

The thick, black oil instantly turned a flight suit or a set of fatigues into an unsightly and uncomfortable mess. Staff Sergeant Frank T. Shepherd, Jr., an aircraft avionics technician assigned to the 633rd Consolidated Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, recalled:

³³ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 1-5.

³⁴ AN 01-40ALC-2, 8.

³⁵ Donald S. Anklin, Fighter Factory General Manager. (The Fighter Factory provides aircraft maintenance for the Military Aviation Museum Skyraider in Virginia Beach, Virginia. The museum owns a AD-4 Skyraider and it is maintained in flyable condition.) Interview by author, Suffolk, Virginia, November 13, 2009.

³⁶ Author's recollection.

When we were dispatched to go down to the Skyraider area to complete some avionics maintenance action, we changed our fatigues. We kept a spare set in the shop and whenever we had to work on a Skyraider, we changed into them. The Skyraiders were always covered with black, sticky, messy oil and it ruined a set of fatigues. It was easier and cheaper to keep a spare set in the shop dedicated just for Skyraider work actions.³⁷

Most Skyraider crew chiefs took care in maintaining their aircraft and tried to keep them clean. The excessive oil leakage and burned on engine exhaust streaks presented a challenge. Crew chiefs discovered an unapproved weapon that was successful in removing all but the most deeply burned deposits. The Skyraider had a simple hydraulic.³⁸ Besides powering the hydraulic system, the fluid was found to have amazing effects on oil deposits. Placed on rags and applied directly to the residue, it removed most of the deposits. After a couple of hours of cleaning, the aircraft presented a shiny appearance which was appreciated by both maintainers and pilots.³⁹ It was never determined if the thin coat of hydraulic film increased the top speed of the aircraft past the maximum level flight airspeed of 320 knots or 450 knots in a dive.⁴⁰

Another effect that resulted from wiping down with hydraulic fluid was on the paint. The “sand and spinach” camouflage color scheme was designed to make the Skyraider harder to see from above by another aircraft.⁴¹ The paint scheme blended the Skyraider in with the South East Asian jungles. It was flat without gloss. After being wiped down with hydraulic fluid, a thin film added a soft luster. The thin film was not slippery enough to cause a slip or fall.⁴²

³⁷ Frank T. Shepherd Jr. Staff Sergeant, USAF, avionics technician. Interview by author, Myrtle Beach, South Carolina (Pleiku Air Base Reunion), September 18 - 20, 2009.

³⁸ AN 01-40ALC-2, 8.

³⁹ Author’s recollection.

⁴⁰ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 1-66.

⁴¹ David H. Payne. President, The Quonset Air Museum, Interview by author, Quonset Point, Rhode Island, May 17–21, 2009.

⁴² Author’s recollection.

Two large speed brake panels were located on the fuselage just aft of the wing on single seat Skyraiders. A third was located on the fuselage belly behind the wing trailing edge.⁴³ These flat panels moved by hydraulic actuators.⁴⁴ The speed brakes, used during attack dives, slowed the aircraft down allowing the pilot time to identify, locate, and then release whatever ordnance he selected. Some pilots used the speed brakes to slow the aircraft during approaches. This practice was fine until they forgot to retract the speed brakes prior to touch down, when it would strike the runway. After a few incidents, maintenance closed a valve to prevent the lower speed brake operation. The cost and man hours needed to remove and replace the lower speed brake was too much. The two fuselage side speed brakes were large enough, so elimination of the third did not dramatically affect braking effectiveness.⁴⁵

The Skyraider had two features that seemed out of place on a modern aircraft. First, forward of the canopy opening lever was a 1/2-inch diameter steel rod, approximately nine or ten inches in length. The rod stood perpendicular to the ground and was used to hold onto during engine runs, as a hand hold to steady the pilot or maintainer, and as a helmet holder when the aircraft was on alert. The second feature was four flat fins behind the cowl flaps above the top exhaust stacks set. The fins were staggered one behind the other and two per side. They prevented the pilot's night vision distortion from engine exhaust flames during night sorties.⁴⁶

The ground attack capabilities of the Skyraider were outstanding. The aircraft could carry approximately 8,800 pounds of external ordnance. It had six outboard under wing Aero 14 hard points: two inboard Mk 51 wing pylons and one Aero 3A center line rack or fifteen

⁴³ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 1-3.

⁴⁴ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 1-27.

⁴⁵ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 3-18.

⁴⁶ Author's recollection.

stations.⁴⁷ All stations except the centerline were simple gravity release. The centerline station was equipped with an explosive charge. The charge forced a “hung” weapon to release if gravity failed. The inboard and centerline stations were plumbed for fuel tanks. All pylons could carry the SUU-11A/A 7.62 mini gun (Gatling type), but it was normally loaded on the inboard pylon. The versatility of the aircraft, along with its ability to carry a very mixed combat load, made the Skyraider ideal for the counter-insurgency fighting in Southeast Asia.⁴⁸

Ordnance carried on the Skyraider included old and new weapons. General purpose bombs were identified as “MK” followed by a number signifying the bomb’s weight—MK 81, 250-pounds, MK 82, 500-pounds, M 117 750-pounds and the M 66A2 2,000-pounds. Captain “Stretch” Ballmes recalled carrying a M66 bomb with a long fuse extender. “The fuse mounted on the extender just cleared the propeller.”⁴⁹ Fuse extenders detonated the bomb above the ground instead of on contact with the ground. The extenders, called “Daisy Cutters” made general purpose bombs effective against personnel and antiaircraft gun emplacements.⁵⁰

USAF armament specialist airman Donald N. Hover, a weapons load crew member, also remembered the M66A2 bomb during his 1968–69 tour at Pleiku. He recalled:

The M 117 general purpose bombs were Korean era left over weapons fitted with MAU-91 high drag tail fins, an older style box shaped unit. It often sent a shower of sparks from the tail fin assembly when the Skyraider was taking off and hit a dip in the runway at Pleiku. The big bombs did not have enough clearance between the fins and the runway surface. When the landing gear compressed, sometimes the fins came in contact with the runway surface. The fins helped the released bomb fall straight off the aircraft.⁵¹

⁴⁷ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 1-70.

⁴⁸ NAVWEPS 01 40ALF-1, 11-15 thru 11-119.

⁴⁹ Ballmes interview.

⁵⁰ Don Dineen, Major, USAF. Interview by author, Fort Walton Beach, Florida, August 7, 2009. (Hereinafter referred to as Dineen interview).

⁵¹ Hover interview.

Napalm was another Skyraider weapon and came in different size tanks. The BLU 10 contained 250 gallons, BLU 32 500 gallons, and BLU 27 750 gallons.⁵² The tanks were easily identified due to their shiny spun aluminum cylinder shape. Each tank had two phosphorous fuses, one at each end. The fuses ruptured and ignited the napalm with ground or tree contact creating a large fireball. The flame pattern usually spread forward from the point of impact.⁵³ Napalm was considered accurate when delivered from low altitude in low angle dives. When napalm was released it sometimes tumbled creating danger to the releasing aircraft.⁵⁴

Unguided rockets were another Skyraider weapon. Two different size rocket launcher tubes were carried. The smaller LAU-32/A held seven rockets and the larger LAU 3/A held nineteen rockets. The pilot could select single or multiple rockets for each pass, to conserve rockets or eliminate more ground targets.⁵⁵ The 2.75-inch diameter air-launched rockets were white phosphorous, smoke, anti-personnel fragmentation, or flechette. The M255 flechette warhead contained approximately 2500 28-gram stamped darts that look like six-penny finishing nails with three circular shaped fins instead of a nail head.⁵⁶

The Skyraider used two different anti-personnel fragmentation bombs. These were easily identified because of their thick, spiral-grooved casing. The MK 47 weighed approximately 250-pounds. Major Dineen liked to mix MK-47s and napalm bombs. He stated: "When the MK-47s were dropped immediately after releasing napalm bombs, the pilot could see concentric circles of

⁵² Hover interview.

⁵³ Dineen interview.

⁵⁴ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 4-43.

⁵⁵ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 8-9.

⁵⁶ Ballmes interview.

napalm spreading in all directions by exploding fragmentation bombs, if the timing was just right.”⁵⁷ A smaller fragmentation bomb, the AN-M 41, was approximately 20-pounds. They were combined together into an inverted triangle shape. Six M 41s were built up into a “six pack,” fitted to a single under wing station, and identified as AN-M1A2, AN-M1A3 or AN-M1A4 fragmentation bombs.⁵⁸ Another way to carry M 41s was to mount them on multiple ejector racks (MER). The MER was able to carry six sets of six bombs, or 36 MK 41s each. If two MERs were carried on the inner pylons, a total of 144 MK 41 20-pound bombs were carried in one load. The six packs broke apart when released, ensuring a wide dispersal of the individual bombs. A Skyraider loaded with 144 MK 41s was an impressive sight.⁵⁹

Another Skyraider ordnance was the cluster bomb unit or CBU. There were different types of CBU. The CBU-14 was an anti-personnel unit that dispensed BLU-3/B bomblets. CBU-22 dispensed bomblets that created a smoke screen. CBU-24 was an anti-personnel bomb that dispensed either 665 BLU-26/B or 36/B fragmentation bomblets. CBU-25 was a newer weapon that addressed the high failure rate of the CBU-14. The CBU-25 was also an anti-personnel weapon but carried 132 BLU-24/B bomblets. These CBUs looked the same; each had six aluminum tubes formed in an inverted triangle shape with a front housing and a middle housing. The middle housing is where the CBU was attached to the aircraft wing station. The CBU weapons were longer than the wing was wide and were easy to identify.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Dineen interview.

⁵⁸ Robert R. Muns, History of the 633rd Special Operations Wing, Volume II, October – December 1968, 17. (Hereinafter referred to as H633SOW, date and page number.)

⁵⁹ Ballmes interview.

⁶⁰ Dineen and Ballmes interview.

CBU-58 was the newest CBU. It contained 58 anti-personnel/anti-material bomblets and differed from the previous CBUs due to shape. After release from the aircraft, a radar altimeter fuse opened the halves dispersing the bomblets. Major Dineen declared:

We never had enough CBU- 58s. The squadron only received a dozen or so per month. They were in high demand due to their effectiveness. The fast movers seemed to get them, but dropped them from too high an altitude to be effective against the enemy on the ground.⁶¹

In addition to under-wing ordnance, the Skyraider was armed with four single-barrel 20-millimeter cannons.⁶² The M-3 aircraft cannons fired 400 rounds per minute, but pilots fired in very short bursts to prevent overheating, which could cause jamming. Short bursts conserved ammunition. Effective range was 2,000-yards in front of the aircraft.⁶³ Each cannon was loaded with approximately 190 rounds, belt-fed from magazines. Folding access panels allowed easy maintenance and uncomplicated reloading.⁶⁴ The cannons fired different type of 20-millimeter rounds, all percussion fired rather than the newer electrically fired. Rounds were ball, tracer, armor piercing, and high explosive incendiary types. The tracer rounds were for the pilot to follow the rounds into the target. Their coating burned brightly, showing their path even in daylight. Tracer rounds were spaced between ball, armor piercing, and high explosive incendiary rounds approximately every seventh place.⁶⁵

Gun malfunctions with the M-3 cannon were common. Two Navy AD-5 side-by-side Skyraiders were loaned to the USAF and evaluated by the Special Air Warfare Center at

⁶¹ Dineen interview.

⁶² NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 8-2

⁶³ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 4-43.

⁶⁴ AN 01-40ALC-2, 629.

⁶⁵ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 8-4.

Hurlburt AFB, Florida in 1963. During the evaluation, armament specialist Technical Sergeant Doug S. Blair was paired with a Navy armament technician from Jacksonville Naval Air Station, to assist and provide training for Air Force armament technicians. Sergeant Blair recalled:

The sailor stated that the 20-millimeter ammunition must be oiled to prevent jamming in the cannon's round chamber. The Navy had experienced gun failures when rounds were not extracted. If the extractor did not remove a round from the chamber and a second round was driven forward as the bolt and firing pin came forward, the jammed round could and often did explode.

Blair had the base fabric shop build a simple mat on which rounds would be laid out, oiled, and then, installed prior to loading the 50-round belts into the aircraft magazines. After gaining experience on the Skyraider's 20-millimeter cannons, Blair designed a safety device that kept the bolt from going into battery. With the device installed, the gun could not be fired and was used during reloading. He declared: "We never had a gun fire on the ground at Hurlburt."⁶⁶

Sergeant Blair made recommendations during the USAF Skyraider evaluation. The Special Air Warfare Center Staff expert on aircraft mounted guns, he suggested that the four 20-millimeter cannons be removed and replaced with six .50-caliber machine guns. The .50s provided more firepower and reliability, but with a somewhat shorter range. Time was available for this modification as aircraft were scheduled for more maintenance after Navy work and Air Force acceptance. The suggestion was disapproved and the 20-millimeters cannons remained. Blair's safety device was not approved, but continued in use at Hurlburt.⁶⁷ Failure to use the device proved exciting. Armament specialist, Airman Donald N. Hover, recalled an incident while working on the Skyraider's cannons. It occurred at Nakhon Phanom (NKP) Air Base after the 6th Air Commando Squadron was inactivated. He accidentally set off the guns while the

⁶⁶ Blair interview.

⁶⁷ Blair interview.

aircraft was on the ground. He was setting armament panel switches in the cockpit during aircraft rearming after a mission. NKP did not use the Blair's safety device.⁶⁸

Another 20-millimeter ammunition issue that caused problems was link position. Each round was connected to the next by a metal link that physically joined them together making up a fifty-round belt. If the links became twisted or bent out of position, they could miss the barrel chamber and cause a jam. Sergeant Blair developed a simple gauge to check distance between rounds. The gauge, passed between the rounds, showed if they were out of position.⁶⁹

Cannon explosions followed the Skyraider throughout its career as the Air Force used the 20-millimeter cannons more than the Navy had. Sergeant Blair explained:

During the 1963 Hurlburt Field evaluation, the cannons fired mostly ball ammunition. When Skyraiders deployed to Vietnam, they used older World War II era high explosive incendiary rounds. These rounds had touchy fuses and exploded if the ejector failed to extract a round. The rounds were percussion fired and impact from a second round detonated the first.⁷⁰

Captain "Stretch" Ballmes recalled "Captain John G. Hayes survived a 20-millimeter cannon explosion during a combat mission on May 7, 1968 in South Vietnam. Hayes ejected, was rescued, and informed squadron personnel that a wing cannon exploded while he was strafing."⁷¹

The Douglas Skyraider was built in a side-by-side variant with two seats and a large compartment behind the cockpit. The canopy was changed completely. It was widened to provide a clear field of view from either of the forward seats. Air Force versions had dual flight controls making new pilot transition to the aircraft easier.⁷² The most identifiable change in the

⁶⁸ Hover interview.

⁶⁹ Blair interview.

⁷⁰ Blair interview.

⁷¹ Ballmes interview.

⁷² Blair interview.

side-by-side version was the aft compartment canopy window panels. They were colored a transparent medium blue to reduce heat build up from the sun. Their color resulted in the compartment being referred to as the “Blue Room.” The side-by-side versions added to the capabilities of the design. They shared most of the systems and components making logistical support easier as spares for one model could be used on the other, with few exceptions.⁷³

After the 1963 evaluation, the Douglas Skyraider served in the USAF. The aircraft perfectly fit the needs that were being realized in the Southeast Asia jungles. The Skyraider was flown by the United States Air Force, Marines, Navy, and South Vietnamese Air Force. While the Skyraider may have been a throwback to the propeller powered aircraft of World War II and Korea, it had capabilities and strengths that were not incorporated into modern jet powered aircraft that were scheduled and supposed to replace it. The Skyraider made its mark on pilots who flew it and pilots who watched the aircraft direct their rescue, helicopter crews that relied on the Skyraider to protect them when they were attempting to extract a downed pilot, Special Forces Special Observation Groups and South Vietnamese ground forces under heavy enemy attack, and the maintainers who worked round the clock ensuring that the plane was ready and safe for any mission that it was to fly.⁷⁴

⁷³ Author’s recollection.

⁷⁴ Blair, Ballmes, Dineen, Hoover, and Reeves interviews.

CHAPTER THREE

TRANSITION FROM PEACE TO WAR

The United States Air Force ordered Tactical Air Command (TAC) to establish a new Skyraider squadron in message AFOAP 84831, dated August 18, 1967. TAC developed the requirements in a command level Programming Plan 18-67, dated October 1, 1967.⁷⁵

Established October 13, 1967, the 6th Air Commando Squadron (ACS) formed at England Air Force Base, Louisiana. The 6th ACS would have around-the-clock world-wide capabilities as a tactical fighter squadron in counter-insurgency and Special Air Warfare environments.⁷⁶ The squadron began with 29 officers and airmen, far short of the 279 authorized totals.⁷⁷

MONTH	OFFICERS		AIRMEN		TOTAL	
	Auth'd	Assgn'd	Auth'd	Assgn'd	Auth'd	Assgn'd
AUG	7	7	32	22	39	29
SEP	7	7	32	23	39	30
OCT	36	8	243	24	279	32
NOV	36	8	243	24	279	32
DEC	36	*	243	*	279	*

* Data for December not available at the time the report was submitted.

Most pilots and enlisted maintainers completed specialized Skyraider training at Hurlburt Air Force Base, Florida. Pilots attended aircraft familiarization training, in which they learned the aircraft and its systems, limitations, and weapons capabilities. They also learned how to

⁷⁵ Donald W. Wilkes, History of the 1st Air Commando Wing, July – December 1967, 19. (Hereinafter referred to as H1ACW, dates, and page number.)

⁷⁶ H1ACW, July – December 1967, 3.

⁷⁷ H1ACW, July – December 1967, Attachment 1.

⁷⁸ H1ACW, July – December 1967, Attachments 1 and 2.

deliver the many weapons that the aircraft could employ. Maintainers learned the aircraft and its systems through Field Training Detachment courses. After completion of the Hurlburt training, pilots and maintainers went to England Air Force Base in Louisiana for qualification training. There, the squadron was forced to use North American Aviation T-28 Trojan aircraft at first. The squadron's Skyraiders were being processed through a complicated collection, overhaul, and modernization program. In late 1967, the Air Force did not have enough Skyraiders to cover all its demands. Finally, the squadron used loaner Skyraiders from the 1st Air Commando Wing.⁷⁹

Most pilots assigned had completed one Vietnam tour. Others completed Skyraider qualification and needed to increase their flight time. Majors Bill Constantine, Joe Byrne, Paul F. Johns, and James D. Reeves were four of the early assigned pilots.⁸⁰ Major Don Dineen⁸¹ and Captain "Stretch" Ballmes⁸² joined in late 1967. Vietnam demanded more pilots, and most knew they would be selected for second combat tour. By volunteering, they had some control of what they flew. If they waited, they could be assigned to a staff job, something fighter pilots dreaded so they volunteered and joined the new Skyraider-equipped squadron.⁸³

Pilots could not accumulate flying hours due to demand of available aircraft for training. As the new squadron's aircraft were being readied, there was a need for pilots to move aircraft across the country. The duty involved travel to Quonset Point Naval Air Station located in

⁷⁹ H1ACW, July – December 1967, 28.

⁸⁰ Reeves, 48.

⁸¹ Dineen interview.

⁸² Ballmes interview.

⁸³ Reeves, 47.

Rhode Island.⁸⁴ This Navy facility was designated as the IRAN overhaul depot for the aircraft. They provided the same service for the Navy's aircraft.⁸⁵

The Overhaul and Repair facility had been established in the early 1960s and its mission was to support the Navy's integrated aeronautical program.⁸⁶ Later, designated the Naval Air Rework Facility, it entered into a fix-priced inter-service support agreement with the Air Force to complete overhaul of transferred Skyraiders. The agreement outlined a simple plan: selected Skyraiders were flown into Quonset Point and overhauled. The R-3350 engines was removed, overhauled, and re-installed. The facility rebuilt hydraulic actuators and cylinders, and removed and replaced brake components, aircraft instruments, and radios. Worn tires and crazed canopies were also changed. The overhauled Skyraiders when completed were new aircraft.⁸⁷ The Quonset Point Naval Air Rework facility, along with maintaining naval air assets, provided the Air Force: 49 aircraft in 1967, 79 aircraft in 1968, and 46 aircraft in 1969. The average overhaul and repair cost was \$56,000 per aircraft.⁸⁸

The inter-service support agreement required thorough maintenance checks. After inspection, each aircraft underwent operational verification, both on the ground and during functional check flights in the air. Aircraft performance had to meet established levels and systems had to operate correctly. Everything was checked to ensure that the aircraft was

⁸⁴ Reeves, 48.

⁸⁵ Overhaul and Repair Facility, Organizational Manual 5451.1C, Quonset Point, Rhode Island. A and R Manual, Number 3-A-2, January 1, 1962. (National Archives and Records Administration, Waltham, Massachusetts. Visited by the author, January 22, 2010. Hereinafter referred to as O and R and page number.)

⁸⁶ O and R, 1.

⁸⁷ Naval Air Rework Facility, Naval Air Station Quonset Point, Rhode Island, Command History Calendar Year 1967, No author, 25. (Hereinafter referred to as NARF, year and page number.)

⁸⁸ NARF, 1967, 6, 1968, 18 and 1969, 23.

reassembled correctly and operated as designed. After all post overhaul checks were completed, the Skyraiders continued on for Air Force modifications. Major Reeves recalled:

At first there wasn't anything to do since we did not have Skyraiders to fly and most new pilots were at Hurlburt Field, Florida, to receive training. Fortunately, there was a demand for Skyraider pilots to ferry aircraft from storage to depot. At the depot, the aircraft were made combat ready. I arranged orders for ferry duty and took to the skies. Ferry flights began at the storage areas, traveled to Rhode Island, and then to the West Coast.⁸⁹

Majors Reeves traveled to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Arizona. Davis-Monthan was a huge multi-service storage facility for military aircraft. The services used the facility to store aircraft in the dry desert climate. Reeves, previously checked out in the side-by-side variant did not require special training for the single-seat Skyraider.⁹⁰

During the early 1960s, the Department of Defense, under Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, changed aircraft identifications. The 1962 United States Tri-Service Designation System standardized aircraft designations. The new system identified each aircraft or weapon and not the manufacturer. The Douglas AD Skyraider became the A-1. The side-by-side AD-4 and AD-5 became the A-1E and A-1G. The single-seat AD-6 and AD-7 became the A-1H and A-1J. (The A-1 designation and term Skyraider are interchangeable.)⁹¹

Skyraiders transferred to the Air Force wore a camouflage paint scheme. The scheme consisted of four colors: two different green colors, a medium tan, and the aircraft bottom was an off-white color.⁹² The different colors were applied in random width bands and designed to

⁸⁹ Reeves, 48.

⁹⁰ Reeves, 48.

⁹¹ Reeves, 48.

⁹² US Navy Photograph, No information provided. *USAF Skyraider*. (National Archives and Records Administration, Waltham, Massachusetts, visited by author, January 22, 2010.)

obscure the aircraft's shape as it flew over the Vietnam landscape. The paint scheme was used on many other fighter aircraft during the Vietnam War.⁹³



A USAF Skyraider taxiing at Quonset Point Naval Air Station.⁹⁴

Previously, Air Force Skyraiders were painted gray, and most Navy/Marine Corps Skyraiders had a navy light gray paint scheme after changing from dark sea blue in the 1950s. The Air Force multi-seat Skyraiders had large black painted panels just aft of the exhaust stacks in an attempt to hide the exhaust stain.⁹⁵ The Air Force dropped the gray color scheme in favor of the “sand and spinach” camouflage in 1967.⁹⁶

⁹³ United States Government Federal Standard 595. *Colors Used in Government Procurement*, General Services Administration. No Author. Printed by the United States Government Printing Office.

⁹⁴ ARH, *A USAF Skyraider at Quonset Point Naval Air Station*. The two Skyraiders behind this aircraft sport the Navy paint scheme.

⁹⁵ United States Air Force Technical Order TO 1-1-4. *Exterior Finishes, Insignia, and Markings Applicable to USAF Aircraft*. Published Under the authority of the Secretary of the Air Force.

⁹⁶ David H. Payne. President: The Quonset Air Museum. Interviewed by author, Quonset Point, Rhode Island, May 17 – 21, 2009.

Just because an aircraft had been through an overhaul and carefully checked over, one might think it was in perfect condition. However, it never worked that way in the real world of aircraft maintenance and operation. Usually, there were radio or wiring malfunctions, but for



Unidentified Navy pilot prepares for a checkout flight.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ ARH, *Unidentified Navy pilot prepares for a checkout flight*. This photo clearly shows the armor plating installed under the wing's center section. The wing jury strut is installed. Notice that this aircraft has minimum oil stains on the fuselage sides.

Major Reeves, it was the failure of the aircraft's big R-3350 engine in flight. Normally, the engines worked great although they leaked a lot of oil. Reeves recalled:

I had been airborne about 20 minutes and was cruising down the east coast at about 3000 feet above the ground. All of a sudden the engine surged and power dropped about 30 percent. Pushing the throttle forward did not help so I made a turn and looked behind where I saw a long black trail. This trail indicated that the engine had swallowed a valve and was losing oil. Additionally, the aircraft would not maintain altitude so I had to start thinking about alternatives.

The alternatives Reeves was considering were where he could land the disabled aircraft safely.

Looking around, there were not many choices. Reeves continued:

After talking on the radio I was notified of an airport off to the left about two miles away, however after turning toward the airport I could only see the ocean. I notified the airport and they answered that once clear of some hills I would see a beach and the field. The big engine continued to run. Turning out over the ocean and lining up with the runway, I made an uneventful landing.

Just after Reeves turned off the runway the engine quit. Later, checking with the flight control center about the time they heard the emergency call and the time the engine quit, he learned that only three minutes had passed. Reeves realized that it had been an exciting three minutes in which everything had gone right. Not only had he survived, but the airplane was repairable and would fly again. Reeves thanked God for putting an airport so close for his use.⁹⁸

The destination for the Skyraiders that Major Reeves and others were moving around was California. The aircraft arrived at McClellan Air Force Base, went into the Sacramento Air Logistics Center, and received Air Force radios and a modern escape system, the Yankee Escape System. This system, when actuated, fired a rocket motor that stood the pilot up and extracted him from the aircraft. Only the pilot, parachute, and survival kit came with the Yankee system rocket motor. At a predetermined time, the system deployed the back automatic parachute. The

⁹⁸ Reeves, 48–49.

Yankee system was much better than just trying to stand and jump from a damaged aircraft as was the escape method in Navy and Marine Skyraiders.⁹⁹

As Major Reeves and other pilots moved Skyraiders from one point to another, events unfolded in the new squadron at England Air Force Base, Louisiana. In a TAC pre-organization movement (POM) inspection report completed January 18, 1968, the team leader, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas C. Readhimer, reported that the new unit, the 6th ACS, could not be completely inspected due to many factors. Aircraft delivery had slipped and there were not enough aircraft for its needs. Both maintenance and administrative personnel were not on station. All required equipment was not on hand.¹⁰⁰ Colonel Readhimer wrote:

TAC Programming Plan 18-76 projected six aircraft and personnel be in place during the November/December [1967] time frame. Had this occurred, it would have enabled the commander [Lieutenant Colonel Wallace A. Ford] to function as a unit for a short period of time and at least deploy with some idea of any weak areas [the units] and overall mission capability. Aircraft and personnel delivery dates slipped varying amounts from 30 to 60 days, yet the readiness/in place dates were not. He [Colonel Ford] will obviously deploy with an unknown capability in some areas.”¹⁰¹

Colonel Readhimer's report detailed many issues that impacted the squadron. The lack of aircraft greatly affected aircrew and maintenance familiarization training. The unit had just three aircraft available during the inspection time frame. Most maintenance personnel were not fully qualified on the aircraft. Twenty-eight maintainers were off station attending FTD courses. They were scheduled to join the squadron on February 1, 1968. “The limited time these people

⁹⁹ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 5-9.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas C. Readhimer, Lieutenant Colonel, USAF, POM Inspection Report, January 18, 1968. USAF Project Corona Harvest Program, declassified June 10, 1980. (Hereinafter referred to as POM and page number.) (Obtained with permission from the United States Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, August 10 – 11, 2009.)

¹⁰¹ POM, 3.

will have to obtain practicable experience and become fully qualified on the assigned aircraft could have an adverse effect on the accomplishment of the maintenance mission.”¹⁰²

The unavailability of aircraft created many problems. Pilots need flight time to practice and hone flying abilities and to move up from wingman to flight lead. Armament specialists had to complete “load barn” training on how weapons worked, what fuse was required, and how to load the aircraft. These shortfalls were acknowledged in the report: “There is insufficient time remaining to fully certify all crews on required munitions. Also, with the compressed schedule, there is no time remaining for the last three crews to be certified. They can not obtain any actual flight line loading experience because the aircraft are scheduled to be moved.”¹⁰³

Along with personnel issues, Readhimer identified numerous shortages of equipment. Navy equipment specific to the Skyraider was unknown. Questions like “Where are they?” and “What is their condition?” were unanswered. “Only 64 percent of known special tools had arrived and only 62 percent of test equipment was on hand, calibrated, and serviceable. The War Readiness Spares Kit (WRSK) had severe deficiencies.” WRSK was designed to provide immediate support for the unit until the regular Air Force supply system could respond at the end destination. The biggest individual item was identified as spare engines: Quick Engine Change Kits and spare engine stands were not available. While the report identified numerous problems, the tasking orders for squadron movement did not change. The 6th ACS was scheduled to depart England Air Force Base at the end of February 1968.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² POM, Attachment 2, 1.

¹⁰³ POM, Attachment 1, 4.

¹⁰⁴ POM, Attachment 2, 1-4.

Even while these issues created command level problems, newly assigned maintainers needed time to translate FTD course information into work experience. Hands-on training was performed where all types of maintenance actions were completed. Fueling, de-fueling, inspections, towing, launch and recovery tasks were completed and the maintainers' training records certified. Engine run qualification was an important task that needed serviceable aircraft to complete. The maintainer's noncommissioned officers worked closely with pilots paving the way for both to get the aircraft they needed. This team approach was critical. Pilots could not do their job without help from maintenance and maintenance could not do theirs without help from the pilots. It was simple: work together, succeed, work separately, fail. Building this team concept and approach resulted in a lasting and special comradery within the squadron. The teamwork built on the professionalism of the new squadron's members.¹⁰⁵

Six weeks after the POM inspection, the 6th ACS moved. Lieutenant Colonel Ford, squadron commander, conducted a pilots' meeting about a week prior to departure.¹⁰⁶ He had the pilots look at each person to their left and right and quietly stated "One of you will not come back." Colonel Ford predicted approximately ten pilots would be lost during the deployment. (In the first twelve months in Vietnam, the 6th ACS lost eight pilots including Colonel Ford.) The next day, in late February 1967, most of the squadron's personnel and baggage was moved by three Lockheed C-141 Starlifter transports for the flight to South East Asia. The aircraft departed England Air Force Base and headed to Elmendorf Air Force Base, Alaska to refuel.¹⁰⁷

Just prior to the squadron's departure, Major Reeves volunteered to travel ahead of the

¹⁰⁵ H1ACW, July – December 1967. Attachment 1, 5.

¹⁰⁶ H1ACW, July – December 1967. Attachment 1, 3.

¹⁰⁷ Ballmes interview.



Southeast Asia and the Skyraider area of operations.¹⁰⁸

squadron and help arrange the bed down at Pleiku. He previously worked on a headquarters staff and it was thought he could help smooth the way for the incoming squadron. A small team was

¹⁰⁸ SEA Theater Map showing the Skyraider area of operations in green.

authorized to lead the way for the rest of the squadron. The major arrived at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, just outside Saigon, on 30 January 1968. Major Reeves declared:

I had just had settled down in the Visiting Officers Quarters for the evening after the long flight from the states. Evidentially, the bad guys heard that I was coming and decided that they would attack before I was well organized. The TET Offensive had just started!

After the initial confusion at 7th Air Force Headquarters, Major Reeves was told to proceed to Nha Trang Air Base and work with the wing commander there.¹⁰⁹

At Nha Trang, it was decided to split the squadron. One part was the 6th ACS and it retained pilots, crew chiefs, and armament teams. The second part moved most of the specialists into a Consolidated Aircraft Maintenance Squadron to support all aircraft at Pleiku including: O-1 Birddog observation aircraft, O-2 Skymaster psychological warfare and forward air controller aircraft, both EC and AC-47 aircraft, and two base HH-43 Huskie fire rescue helicopters.

Reeves continued:

There were strong disagreements during the discussion, but the decision stood. It would be implemented when the squadron arrived. While the 6th ACS was in route to Southeast Asia and Pleiku Air Base, it was split. Lt. Col. Ford was completely left out of the decision and did not find out until he landed at Pleiku.¹¹⁰

Also, the 6th replaced the 1st ACS that had been relocated to Nahkon Phanom Air Base in Thailand. Most spoke of the base as either NKP or Naked Fanny. Four aircraft and a small staff remained at Pleiku waiting for the new squadron.¹¹¹ This group was commander by Lieutenant Colonel Norm Repp.¹¹² The 633rd Combat Support Group became the umbrella organization

³⁵ Reeves, 49.

¹¹⁰ Reeves, 49-50.

¹¹¹ Larry H. Palmer, History of the 633rd Combat Support Group (PACAF), January – March 1968, 2. (Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell Air Force Base, AL, visited by author August 10 – 11, 2009. Hereinafter referred to as H633CSG, date, and page number.)

¹¹² Reeves, 49.

and the new squadron would be under them.¹¹³ Another Skyraider squadron, the 602nd ACS was also moved to NKP consolidating the bulk of USAF Skyraiders there. The incoming 6th ACS would become the only USAF Skyraider equipped squadron in South Vietnam.¹¹⁴

The major squadrons or detachments at Pleiku included Detachment 2, 4th ACS with AC-47 Gunships, 9th ACS with both C-47 and O-2 psychological warfare aircraft, Detachment 9, 38th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron with HH-43F helicopters, Detachment 5, 30 Weather Squadron, Detachment 2, 620th Tactical Control Squadron responsible for air traffic control, Detachment 1, 15th Aero Port Squadron responsible for cargo and passenger movement, 362nd Tactical Electronic Warfare Squadron with EC-47s then classified mission, now known as intelligence gathering through radio intercepts and the 834th Air Division that coordinated airlift activities. These units, while supported by the Combat Support Group, fell under other off base headquarters such as the 14th Air Commando Wing at Nha Trang Air Base, Republic of Vietnam or the 1st Air Commando Wing at NKP in Thailand.¹¹⁵

The area surrounding Pleiku Air Base in the central highlands varied from rice paddies to thick forests and jungles, flat stretches of land, and rolling hills. Eighty percent of the population was Montagnard (mountain people). Two miles across the valley was the large U. S. Army installation, Camp Holloway, home of the 4th Infantry Division along with a large helicopter aviation unit. The aviation units flew Boeing CH-47 Chinook and Bell UH-1 Huey helicopters.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Reeves, 49.

¹¹⁴ *Welcome to Pleiku* package dated January 1968. Typed, letter sized paper, and provided to the new comers of the 6th ACS. Package signed by R. J. Hullar, Colonel, USAF, Commander, 3. (Hereinafter referred to as Welcome Package and page number.)

¹¹⁵ Welcome Package, 5.

¹¹⁶ Welcome Package, 5

The Pleiku Air Base runway was almost 6,000 feet long and had a parallel taxiway. The different flying units were spread out beside the taxi way almost the full length of the runway. Each unit operated from its own designated maintenance area where the aircraft were parked, mostly in revetments for increased protection from mortar and rocket attacks. The different maintenance support shops, sheet metal, machine, hydraulics, engines and avionics were spread out behind the aircraft parking areas.¹¹⁷ Up a small hill lay the cantonment living area with base headquarters, central security control, fire department, dispensary and dental clinics, dining hall and barracks for officers and enlisted personnel. A base chapel tended to all religions and held regular scheduled mass. The Base Exchange (department store) snack bar, barber shop, hobby shop, and theater were located in this area. The movie theater was an open air area with benches and a large wood screen. Also, the airmen, NCO, and Officers Clubs were located in this area. Three new two-story airmen barracks were under construction for the newly arriving 6th ACS.¹¹⁸

Off duty airmen could visit the base photo shop, arts and craft shop, lapidary shop, and tape shop. Star sapphires were especially popular at the lapidary shop while the tape shop was always full. Airmen used the shop to record music onto 7 and 1/2-inch reels for the tape stereo systems that were very popular in Vietnam during the late 60s. Airmen borrowed friend's tapes and recorded them in the shop. One airman may record two albums from one artist while others selected the better songs from an album.¹¹⁹ Returning from work, airmen sought tapes to add to their collections. It was not odd to see three or four tape recorders lined up recording music that were hooked in series, all recording from the first tape. The practice and friendship between

¹¹⁷ Walter H. Richardson, Master Sergeant, USAF, Interviewed by author, Fort Walton Beach, Florida, August 8, 2009. (Hereinafter referred to as Richardson interview.)

¹¹⁸ Welcome Package, 7 – 9.

¹¹⁹ Welcome Package, 11.

airmen was part of the “bonding” teamwork that became the heart of the new squadron.¹²⁰ Stereo systems were hot commodities. However, the music and volume of one may not be appreciated by another. Sometimes, a barracks chief had to step between individuals because they did not like the music the other played. No matter what, if an airman was trying to sleep, these music wars made for an unpleasant sleep time. Fortunately, these were rare incidents.¹²¹

When the Starlifters arrived at Pleiku, everyone just wanted to dismount.¹²² Some noticed the humidity, while others who had served in Vietnam before remembered the heat and smell. The people were hurried through processing and barrack assignments. One of the first welcoming statements was news that the squadron had been split. Air Force leadership decided squadron personnel would be better utilized supporting all aircraft at Pleiku and not just the Skyraiders. There were no provisions for training before assuming new duties. These people would have to learn on the job during wartime conditions. Everyone was shocked, but that was not all. Lieutenant Colonel Norm Repp introduced himself as the new 6th ACS commander. He had eight months in country experience with the 1st ACS and out ranked Colonel Ford. As people picked up their baggage, there was little conversation.¹²³

In a few days everyone was sorted out. Sixty-nine specialists went into the 633rd Combat Support Squadron.¹²⁴ Most crew chiefs and weapons team maintainers remained with the 6th ACS. When they arrived at the Skyraider maintenance area, they found four A-1E aircraft left by the 1st ACS. Immediately, Colonel Repp began an intensive flight schedule for the newly

¹²⁰ Author’s recollection.

¹²¹ Author’s recollection.

¹²² H633CSG, January – March 1968, 2.

¹²³ Ballmes interview.

¹²⁴ H633CSG, January – March 1968, 3.

assigned pilots.¹²⁵ Both crew chiefs and weapons load teams began their duties as aircraft needed to be maintained, inspected, refueled, towed, and on and on. Weapons teams needed to be certified on the weapons that the Skyraider used. Aircraft were loaded, launched, and recovered. While time was not a hindrance, the number of aircraft available was. The squadron's aircraft were somewhere in route to Southeast Asia and the squadron only waited on the notice that the Skyraiders arrived and where they would be delivered to.¹²⁶

In early March 1968, the 6th ACS was notified that a ship carrying half of the squadrons' Skyraiders had arrived.¹²⁷ The squadron developed a plan to send a small team of maintainers to Cam Rahn Air Base, Republic of Vietnam. The base was located on the coast of the South China Sea. The U. S. Army maintained a small airfield next to the port facilities. The small group arrived and then traveled to the harbor field. In the middle of the big bay was moored the United States Navy escort carrier, USS *Breton*, CVE-23, re-designated as an aviation transport, anchored there because its anti-aircraft gun tubs prevented it from docking at the facility's wharf.¹²⁸

The Army used the small airfield for moving supplies in country. The facility was primitive when compared to Pleiku Air Base. The runway was approximately 1800 foot long. The aircraft and work areas had Marsden matting installed, often referred to as PSP (perforated steel planking). The matting was used for runway repairs or, as in this case, to establish a small landing field. The mats clipped together and were remarkably flexible, yet provided a flat, hard surface work area. It was excellent for small propeller powered aircraft and helicopters. A small

¹²⁵ Reeves, 50.

¹²⁶ Dineen and Ballmes interviews.

¹²⁷ H633CSG, January – March 1968, 3.

¹²⁸ Author's recollection.



6th ACS Skyraiders at the Cam Rahn Port facility Army Airfield.¹²⁹

building was used by the maintenance team for the duration of the time it spent at the field. There were three dirt filled revetment type walls that could hold two small aircraft or helicopters. The revetments were constructed out of plywood and timber. Sand and dirt filled the structure. While the work area was primitive, it was large enough to hold the Skyraiders as they were collected from the USS *Benton*. The aircraft were lined up close together. The wings remained in the folded position as work progressed.¹³⁰

Once all the Skyraiders were off loaded, maintenance teams began to prepare the aircraft for flight. There was a sense of urgency; the maintainers knew the aircraft were needed to fight the war. They performed the work carefully knowing that the lives of the pilots relied on the delivery of safe aircraft. The work progressed smoothly under the primitive conditions. As the

¹²⁹ ARH, *Army Field, Cam Rahn Harbor area*. In this photo notice that the Skyraider on the right is a side-by-side variant. The cart behind the left end Skyraider is a light cart used to illuminate the work area. On the right last two Skyraiders visible on the vertical stabilizer is the protective tape.

¹³⁰ ARH, *Army Field, Cam Rahn Harbor area*.

maintainers performed their work, all felt a sense of pride. Some maintenance activities were not covered in the aircraft technical orders. One was the challenge of removing all the protective material that had been installed before the aircraft were placed on the ship.

The Skyraiders had chemically treated protective barrier paper installed to prevent salt water or air borne corrosion to get started. The paper was very strong and was taped to the aircraft over all openings. The tape was commonly referred to as speed or duct tape. It had been installed before the aircraft were placed onboard the USS *Breton* at Alameda Naval Air Station, California.¹³¹ The wing stations, inboard, and centerline pylons were sealed, along with the canopy, cowl flap opening, flight control surfaces and speed brakes. The paper and tape were everywhere, and it all had to be removed.¹³²

One of the first tasks after removing the paper and tape was to install the Yankee extraction rocket and arm the system. One egress specialist installed the system components one aircraft at a time. He also took the time to refresh crew chief memory on safe procedures when working around the system. It was another example of teamwork and comradery that was developed within the squadron. The aircraft were inspected using the required inspection manuals. Once these tasks were completed the aircraft were filled with aviation fuel and engine oil. Again and again, everything was checked and rechecked.¹³³

The final maintenance task was the engine run. It was drained of corrosion preventative compound (CPC). Once the CPC was removed, the engine was run up in a special procedure called a “burp” or “spit” run. A specially designed nose case bolt was removed along with the

¹³¹ H633CSG, January – March 1968, 3.

¹³² Author’s recollection.

¹³³ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 3-8 – 3-9.

spark plugs from the front nine cylinders. The engine was started and run at idle until oil flowed from the hole. This procedure ensured oil was flowing in the front of the engine. As the engine ran at low speed, any remaining CPC was forced out through the empty spark plug holes. This run created a very distinctive burping or spitting sound as CPC was expelled from the engine. When CPC was cleared out; the run was stopped and the engine and cowling washed. The bolt and spark plugs were reinstalled. A second run was performed and the revolution increased above idle settings. This run ensured the engine and all aircraft systems were satisfactory.¹³⁴

The Skyraiders were prepared in pairs and when ready, a call was made for two pilots to come to get the aircraft. The small team readied the aircraft and all work stopped when the two pilots arrived. Pilots asked about the aircraft and then began their inspections.¹³⁵ The only question pilots raised was when they observed the wing support struts safety wired to the inboard wing pylons. The maintainers answered that stowing them there made the best sense. The pylons were the safest location for the long struts and the maintainers did not want them to break loose inside the fuselage if placed there. The pilots agreed and the matter ended.¹³⁶

The excitement of upcoming Skyraider launch filled the area. Crew chiefs provided assistance helping stow and adjust the parachute harness. Some crew chiefs asked if the pilot would mind doing a flyby after take off. Most of the time, the pilots agreed. After checking everything, the crew chief dismounted and took a position in front of the aircraft. When ready, the engine was started and the pilot checked out the aircraft systems. Next, the aircraft taxied to

¹³⁴ Author's recollection.

¹³⁵ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 3-8 – 3-9.

¹³⁶ Author's recollection.

the end of the runway while maintenance members lined up to watch. They had a spectacular opportunity to watch because the runway was close to where the maintainers stood.¹³⁷



Engine Start at Cam Rahn Bay Army Airfield.¹³⁸

After individual Skyraider takeoffs, the two aircraft joined together. After ensuring everything was OK, they lined up with the runway and flew over it at, around 200 feet.

¹³⁷ Author's recollection.

¹³⁸ ARH, *Engine Start at Cam Rahn Bay Army Airfield*. Note the PSP on the ground below the boots of the two crew chiefs. The wing jury strut is safety wired to the outboard of the inner wing pylon.



Skyraider Taxi.¹³⁹

Sometimes the Skyraiders passed so low they blew sand off of the runway. . During one fly-by, a maintainer had climbed up on a revetment wall and when the Skyraiders passed over him he declared “I could have reached up and touched the plane!” The maintainers always appreciated viewing their work efforts displayed this manner. The aircraft flew to DaNang Air Base and then on to Pleiku. This flight profile was used to meet the in-country requirement that any new aircraft have two flights prior to beginning combat operations.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ ARH, *Skyraider Taxi*. As the crew chief motions the Skyraider forward out of the maintenance area, you can see the small diameter hard rubber tail wheel. Also notice the tail serial number that will be changed from the Navy style to the Air Force type.

¹⁴⁰ Author’s recollection.

After preparing the squadrons Skyraiders, four A-1G's remained as the team thought these aircraft would be readied by the 1st ACS, but no work had been done on them. The team was informed they must prepare these four Skyraiders. They replaced the ones left for the incoming squadron.¹⁴¹ The conversation that followed was strongly negative. Why should these aircraft be sent on to the 1st ACS and not stay with the 6th ACS?¹⁴²

For some reason the launch of these four aircraft did not go as smoothly as the previous sorties. The delivery pilots were standoffish. During the last Skyraider launch, the pilot ignored the request for a flyby declaring "He did not have time!" Someone got hold of a black paint spray can and applied graffiti under the wing while the pilot was strapped in. The graffiti declared "The 1st ACS was here first, but the 6th ACS is the best!" Inter-squadron competition was beginning between the old and new Skyraider squadrons. The team returned to Pleiku and when they went to work, they were questioned about the graffiti. None of the team admitted anything and the matter was not pursued by Colonel Repp.¹⁴³ When the remaining ten Skyraiders arrived at Cam Rahn, the process was repeated. By early June, the squadron reached its full complement of aircraft.¹⁴⁴

In the 6th ACS, a crew chief was assigned one aircraft as the primary maintainer for it. Pilots were also paired up with individual aircraft. Both were recognized as being part of a team. The 6th ACS Skyraiders had pilot and crew chief names painted on the left side of the aircraft below the canopy. Both smile when they recall their Skyraiders in an old photograph.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹ H633CSG, January – March 1968, 3.

¹⁴² Authors recollections.

¹⁴³ Author's recollections.

¹⁴⁴ H633CSG, January – March 1968, 3.

¹⁴⁵ Ballmes, Beam, and McAskill interviews.

The squadron began to fit into life in a combat zone. Work was often followed by off-duty relaxation, but choices were limited. The three clubs (officer, noncommissioned officer and airmen) became popular places where people escaped for a bit of relaxation over drinks and conversation. From time to time there would be live music. Air Force Master sergeant Walter H. Richardson recalled some of his off-duty experiences while assigned as an engine shop superintendent in the 633rd Consolidated Maintenance Squadron just as the 6th ACS arrived. Live bands were popular, especially those that played music on demand and Richardson was a singer and part of a small group of airmen that performed at the clubs. Richardson recalled an occasion when he was singing this song which had been rewritten to the tune of Barry Sadler's *Ballad of the Green Berets*." Instead of the Green Beret story, the lyrics had been customized around the Skyraider. The individual who penned the new version is unknown but the intention is very clear. The song went like this:

The Men Who Fly the A-1E

Fighting soldiers ever fly
work their tears until they die
but the greatest men you'll ever see
are the men who fly the A-1E.
The Green Berets were all pinned down
and their feet pushed in the ground
but the greatest sight they could ever seen
were the Air Force planes called the A-1Es
The Green Berets lost that day
all was love but love and pray
pray for what they were hoping for
was an air Force plane called the A-1E
Pin those wings on my son's chest
make him one of Americas best
let him go down in history (placing his hand over his heart)
an Air Force mechanic who works on the A-1E

Richardson sang this song across Vietnam, until one night while performing at the 4th Infantry Division enlisted club, a large Green Beret stood up and said, "Pretty good, but now sing it

right.” Richardson admitted that he did not know the correct lyrics, but he quickly learned them under the direction of that Green Beret. Laughing he declared “I never sang that song at another Army base after the incident.”¹⁴⁶

After the squadron received all of its Skyraiders and personnel, the day’s routine began to take shape as pilots and maintainers settled in at the new location and demands of the Vietnam War.¹⁴⁷ Daily routines quickly became more regular as the flying schedule began to repeat itself after a few weeks. Pilots flew combat missions to gain local area familiarization. Along with familiarization missions, combat sorties began to add up for the newly arrived squadron.

February–March Mission Flown¹⁴⁸	
Out-of-country	126
In-country	160
Combat flight hours	1,924

As more and more missions accumulated, pilots and maintainers continued the teamwork, comradery, and trust that had been begun at England Air Force Base, in Louisiana. The operational tempo of air missions slowly increased as the pilots became familiar with combat requirements. Besides regularly daily schedules missions, the squadron began to stand alert duty for any emergency contingencies. Four Skyraiders were readied, armed and stood by for any sudden call for close air support. The 6th Air Commando Squadron was ready for war.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Walter H. Richardson, Master sergeant, USAF, engine shop superintendent. Interview by author, Fort Walton Beach, Florida, August 6, 2009. (Hereinafter referred to as Richardson interview.)

¹⁴⁷ H633CSG, January–March 1968, 3.

¹⁴⁸ H633CSG, January – March 1968, 20. During the research into the archives of the 6th ACS, it was discovered that the history of the unit is incomplete. Data, names, and missions are missing from the historical accounts stored by the Air Force. The missing data prevents a complete statistical record of all mission data, i.e., total missions for the period covered.

¹⁴⁹ Ballmes interview.

CHAPTER FOUR

OPERATION PRAIRIE FIRE

During 1968, the 6th Air Commando Squadron and its Skyraiders were used across Southeast Asia: in South Vietnam, North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The squadron's primary mission was to provide close air support to American Special Forces Studies and Observation Group (SOG) teams deployed into Laos and Cambodia. SOG teams and the 6th ACS worked together under the umbrella program known as Operation Prairie Fire. Prairie Fire was code for SOG teams operating in extremely high threat areas.¹⁵⁰ These teams were small Special Forces and South Vietnamese ground units that were inserted in enemy territory and tasked to watch and observe without being spotted themselves. A squadron secondary role was search and rescue (SAR) missions. Sometimes the SOG and rescue missions became one.¹⁵¹

The 6th ACS was assigned the tail code ET. Other A-1 squadrons were identified using different tail codes: the 1st ACS used TC, the 22nd ACS used TS, and the 602nd ACS used TT. Also, the 6th ACS was told to use the radio call sign Spad.¹⁵² The call signs for Skyraiders squadrons were: 1st ACS; Hobo, 602nd ACS; Firefly, and the 22 ACS; Zorro. The Sandy call sign was used by any NKP Skyraiders when flying search and rescue (SAR) missions. The 6th retained the call sign Spad for all missions.¹⁵³

When the Skyraiders arrived from the Cam Ranh Harbor airfield, it was discovered that tires on their tail wheels had suffered considerable damage. The damage was caused by the PSP

¹⁵⁰ Larry H. Palmer, Sergeant, USAF, Unit historian, History of the 633rd Special Operations Wing, January – March 1968, 17. (Hereinafter referred to as PH633SOW, date, and page number.

¹⁵¹ Reeves, 50.

¹⁵² PH633CSG, January – March 1968, 3.

¹⁵³ Ballmes and Dineen interviews.

laid on the Army airfield. The problem was quickly resolved when all aircraft had the solid hard



Skyraider loaded with eight MK 82 500-pound bombs and a 300-gallon center line tank.¹⁵⁴

rubber wheel removed and replaced with larger inflatable tires. The larger tire did not retract completely into the tail wheel well. It also did not disintegrate when taxiing on PSP surfaces.¹⁵⁵

Maintenance began each day with pre-flight inspections on aircraft scheduled to fly. Crew chiefs walked to their aircraft in parking revetments surrounded on three sides by aluminum-walled structures filled with dirt, rocks, and sand. The revetment walls were around four feet thick and fifteen to sixteen feet high. At Pleiku, one Skyraider was placed into each revetment. There were five rows of four revetments and some rows faced each other. The revetments protected aircraft from mortar and rocket blast damage. If one aircraft was hit during an attack, the thick-walled revetments were designed to prevent damage to a sister spot. Each

¹⁵⁴ ARH, *Skyraider loaded with eight MK 82 500-pound bombs and a 300-gallon center line tank*. This aircraft is carrying approximately 9,040 pounds of ordnance, fuel and oil. Additionally, the large pneumatic tire is easily observed in front of the arresting hook.

¹⁵⁵ AN 01-40ALC-2, 10.

revetment had an A-1 generator unit to provide electrical power to the aircraft and a large bright red fire extinguisher.¹⁵⁶ Every two spots shared a 55-gallon can for dirty rags and other trash.¹⁵⁷

Pre-flight inspections required a physical visual examination of the aircraft. Work cards guided the inspection process and pointed out critical parts, fluid and air pressures, and fuel clarity requirements. Hydraulic and air accumulators were checked for required pressures. The fuel system was checked to ensure there was no water in the tanks. Was the aircraft ready for flight? Was it safe? After completing the pre-flight inspection, crew chiefs checked the forms to see if the aircraft had been serviced with fuel and oil. Each mission tasking came with required fuel loads and auxiliary tank needs. On the Skyraider, the quantity was always the same; a full 36 gallon oil tank and 380 gallons in the main tank and full drop tank (s), if installed.¹⁵⁸

Armament teams loaded aircraft on direction from the operations center. The center planned sorties, weapons loads, aircraft tail numbers, and pilots to fly the mission. After everything was checked against the schedule, crew chiefs cleaned their aircraft. One of the most important tasks was to clean the windscreen and canopy. A dirt speck could be easily confused with another aircraft and break a pilot's concentration, especially if the mission was in North Vietnam. The windscreen and canopy were cleaned using soft rags, water, and elbow grease.¹⁵⁹

Once the crew chief was satisfied the aircraft was ready, he notified the line chief who informed operations. Crew chiefs worked hard to ensure their aircraft were ready and safe, this was more than just a job; it was part of the team concept between maintenance and the pilots.

¹⁵⁶ No author, title page missing. History of the 633rd Special Operations Wing, October–December 1968, Chart 8. Hereinafter referred to as H633SOW, date, and page number.)

¹⁵⁷ Author's recollections.

¹⁵⁸ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 1-16.

¹⁵⁹ AN 01-40ALC-2, 107.

Operations sent pilots to each aircraft and to perform their preflight inspections. This was not an exact duplication of the crew chief's efforts; pilots examined different things. They checked attachment of all weapons. Were the bombs correct for the mission? Were they fused as directed? Was the aircraft configured as required? They walked around the Skyraiders following a designated route with specific tasks and looked for anything out of place or unsafe.¹⁶⁰



6th ACS Commander Lt. Col Norman Repp in front of Skyraider 021 Su Na Sam.¹⁶¹

When the pilot was satisfied that the aircraft was ready, he climbed into the cockpit. The crew chief offered assistance with the pilot's flight kit, extra water bottles, charts, maps, and checklists. Pilots often accepted assistance when connecting their torso harness to the parachute.

¹⁶⁰ AN 01-40ALC-2, Figure 3-1 Exterior Inspection, 3-9.

¹⁶¹ ARH, 6th ACS Commander, Lt. Col Norman Repp in front of Su Nan Sam. The photograph shows some of the ordnance carried by the aircraft. The v-shape in front is approximately 790- rounds of 20-milimeter ammunition. The circle in the forward right corner of the photograph is a static ground point.

Two Koch fittings had to be mated together connecting the harness to the parachute, and there was not a lot of room for the pilot to turn to make the connection. After mating the quick release fittings, the pilot connected the following: seat belt, shoulder restraint harness, anti-G suit hose, oxygen hose, and radio connection. He shifted his flight kit out of the way of the control stick and usually placed his flight checklist either on the instrument panel cover or in a small leg pocket. Once ready he gave the crew chief a thumb's up signal.¹⁶²

The crew chief climbed down and positioned himself clear of the propeller, in front of the Skyraider's left wing. The pilot set radios and placed the fuel tank selector to MAIN. Starting power was from the ground generator and not the aircraft's battery. When ready, the pilot nodded to the crew chief and made a circular motion with his arm, the signal to start the engine. The crew chief responded with the same arm motion and counted as the propeller turned. After sixteen propeller blades had passed the same point, the crew chief often twisted his hand indicating that the magneto switch be turned to BOTH by the pilot. Once the switch was turned, the big R-3350 fired; emitted a large amount of white-gray smoke, and started.¹⁶³

The pilot checked the aircraft's instruments to ensure operating pressures were met, especially oil pressure. If the oil pressure gauge did not register within 10 seconds or rise to 40 pounds per square inch within 20 seconds, the engine was shut down. While the pilot scanned his instruments, the crew chief checked the engine area and looked for leaks or evidence of fire. His position allowed him to see much more of the engine and exhaust areas not visible to the pilot. Again, this was teamwork in progress. When satisfied, the pilot turned the battery switch

¹⁶² NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 3-3.

¹⁶³ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 3-10-11.

to BATT/GEN and signaled the crew chief to remove the auxiliary generator cord.¹⁶⁴ Once auxiliary power was disconnected, the pilot signaled to remove the wheel chocks, placed in front and behind the tires to prevent movement. Once the chocks were removed, the pilot pushed the throttle forward, taxied out of the revetment, and headed to the runway.¹⁶⁵

At the end of the runway was an area where pilots completed the pre-takeoff checks. Once the pre-takeoff checklist was completed, the pilot placed his hands on the cockpit rail. This signaled a specialized ground crew to begin their aircraft external check for anything out of the ordinary. Maintainers did a quick “last chance” inspection while weapons teams removed all safety pins from the weapons. After that, the pilot taxied onto the runway and took off.¹⁶⁶ Most missions were either two or four aircraft. After takeoff, they would rendezvous, fly to the target, and check with Forward Air Controllers (FACs). FACS were experienced pilots flying Cessna O-1 Birdog, Cessna O-2 Skymaster, or North American Rockwell OV-10 Bronco aircraft. Later in the war, the North American F-100 Super Sabre was used in a fast Misty FAC role.¹⁶⁷

Pilots checked before being scheduled to fly solo and these first missions were flown in the A-1E side-by-side variant. Major Reeves recalled two of his checkout flights. Just prior to the second flight, he was told some of the squadron’s equipment had arrived and needed his attention, so he exited the aircraft. The aircraft went on the mission and when it returned, Reeves learned that it had been shot up. A shell had penetrated the cockpit where he would have been sitting. Curiosity got the best of him, he went to the aircraft, and strapped himself in. Reeves

¹⁶⁴ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 3-10.

¹⁶⁵ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 3-11.

¹⁶⁶ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 3-12–3-18.

¹⁶⁷ Reeves, 53.

stated: “No matter which way I might have been leaning, since you are strapped in so tight that only your head moves, the shell would have hit me in the head and I would have been dead.”¹⁶⁸

On the fourth and last checkout flight on February 8, 1968, Reeves and an instructor pilot flew in one Skyraider while another Skyraider was flown by Major Robert G. Lapham. Both aircraft were diverted and told to head toward an enemy held Special Forces base at Lang Vei.¹⁶⁹ Three North Vietnamese Army tanks were heading toward another Special Forces outpost. The instructions were simple—hit them. The ordnance carried was ideally suited for use against tanks. Both Skyraiders carried napalm and 2.75-inch rockets.¹⁷⁰ Major Reeves remembered:

For the first time I felt really scared. We were probably going to have to fly down the tanks barrel while they were shooting at us and we were trying to hit them with napalm. It was about a forty minute flight to that location and I wasn't feeling any braver. We found the tanks where they had stopped; one in a stream bed, another on the bank and the third against a 30–40 feet high embankment. Major Lapham said he would take the tank in the water and Reeves could have the others.

Reeves spaced himself and just as Lapham was at his release point; he commenced his attack against the tank on the sand. Lapham dropped napalm scoring a perfect hit on the tank, pulled up, and suddenly blew up in a giant explosion. Reeves continued his run, hit the target, and pulled up quickly to avoid what had happened to Lapham. There was nothing left of Lapham's aircraft except small pieces. Reeves circled around, made second run, and destroyed the third tank. Later, Reeves looked at the area and discovered a number of dead trees that were very difficult to see, almost invisible from the air. He believed Lapham had hit one of these nearly invisible trees when he pulled up after the attack run.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ Reeves, 50.

¹⁶⁹ H633CSG, January – March 1968, 17.

¹⁷⁰ Reeves, 51 and H633CSG, January – March 1968, 16.

¹⁷¹ Reeves, 51 and H633CSG, January – March 1968, 17.

The demands of working in a combat zone affected pilots and maintainers differently. Often, after completing a dangerous mission, pilots were quiet when the crew chiefs helped them exit the aircraft. Where pilots had been happy-go-lucky before takeoff, they were much more reserved, and often soaked in sweat. Conversations between the crew chiefs and pilots were short and rarely went beyond a simple description of a discrepancy that they had to record in the aircraft forms. Crew chiefs quickly learned not to pry and kept conversation centered on the aircraft. Talk about specific missions only occurred if the pilot wanted to explain the flight.



A Skyraider returning from a mission.¹⁷²

There were never enough crew chiefs to cover round-the-clock maintenance needs. The Air Force used a manning figure of two crew chiefs per aircraft. While on paper this might have been enough, on the flightline it was not. Aircraft needed maintainers to pre-flight, fuel, and launch. There were aircraft with discrepancies that needed to be worked on before the plane could be scheduled for flight. Phase docks demanded maintainers. Added to maintenance requirements were normal personnel scheduling: hospital and dental appointments, training

¹⁷² ARH, *Skyraider Returning From a Mission*. The crew chief is signaling the pilot to come forward.

demands and other administrative actions. If a Skyraider broke down somewhere, a maintenance team had to be sent to recover it. Most crew chiefs worked on other aircraft after the one's they first launched. The heart of the maintenance area was the flight line shop. The flight line shop was where crew chiefs could relax, read, or smoke. Their next job might be printed on a special



Skyraider chocked as the pilot prepares for engine shut down.¹⁷³

board where the squadron's aircraft status was recorded. They might have some training action entered in their personnel records or be told of a scheduled base appointment.¹⁷⁴

Some maintainers were drawn to the runway side of the revetments and watched aircraft lineup, takeoff, or land. Skyraiders taxied onto the runway sometimes in single file, or

¹⁷³ ARH, *Skyraider chocked as the pilot prepares for engine shut down*. The crew chief had just placed the chocks in front of the wheels under the right wing. The aircraft will be pushed back into a revetment after the pilot shuts down the engine and leave for his de-briefing in Operations.

¹⁷⁴ Author's recollections.

sometimes in pairs with each aircraft positioned near the edge. They separated in this way so one aircraft could still takeoff if the other aborted. Maintainers easily heard the engine as the pilot pushed the throttle forward. As the Skyraider gained airspeed, the tail came up. The exact point where the aircraft left the ground varied. Some pilots lifted off as the aircraft reached a designated airspeed (V2), while others waited a longer, before they eased back on the control stick. On Skyraider takeoffs, maintainers could easily observe rudder deflection as the pilot compensated propeller torque known as “P-factor.” P-factor pulled the aircraft to the left and was countered by moving the rudder to the right. This kept the aircraft headed straight.¹⁷⁵

Maintainers watched takeoffs with a deep sense of pride and accomplishment. They provided a safe aircraft keeping their part of the trust between maintainers and pilots. Most takeoffs occurred without incident, but at times there were difficulties. During one Skyraider takeoff, as it lifted off the runway a 750-pound general purpose bomb fell off and slid down the runway. The pilot must not have felt the bomb drop because he took no action. One of the most spectacular takeoffs occurred immediately after takeoff as the aircraft flew over the runway end. The Skyraider sharply turned, began dropping ordnance, and never gained any altitude. Bombs dropped as the aircraft circled around for a landing. All ordnance was dropped before the Skyraider landed. The pilot had experienced a “chip light,” indicating a possible engine failure, and jettisoned the heavy bomb load as he turned back for landing. If the engine seized, and the heavy bomb load remained, the aircraft could stall and crash. The pilot wanted to land immediately, and this was the fastest method.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 3-16.

¹⁷⁶ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 5-4.

Flying Prairie Fire missions was dangerous but could be rewarding when successful.¹⁷⁷

The close air support tasking was demanding and pilots had to be extremely accurate in placing their bombs, bullets, and rockets on target. Failure to be accurate could kill friendly forces rather than the enemy. The 6th ACS maintained four alert aircraft at Pleiku Air Base for emergencies. Two alert aircraft were scrambled to provide close air support to a SOG team that was being pursued by a large Viet Cong forces. Major Reeves described the mission:

We were carrying rockets and bomblets [CBU]. On this occasion, the Skyraider was loaded with anti personnel CBUs and rocket launcher pods on every other wing station. The bomblets were designed with a small propeller on top and as they spiraled down the propeller would turn and arm them. They were designed to hit the ground or tree top and then the next jarring of them would cause them to explode. They did not drop in a straight line after release, but drifted toward the left for 15 feet or so for every 100 feet of altitude, so you had to be very accurate.¹⁷⁸

Arriving at the destination, and checking in with the on-scene FAC, who was in radio contact with the friendly forces. The FAC marked the area where the enemy was and the alert Skyraiders made a rocket attack on them. Reeves noticed:

That the good guys would have to cross a trail and reach a bomb crater about 100 feet on the other side in order to establish a good defensive position until the chopper arrived. We made contact with the friendlies and advised them that I would put bomblets down next to the road if they would tell me when they crossed the road. We synchronized our time and we were position so that when they started across the road, we laid a string of bomblets on both sides of the road as soon as they crossed.

The timing was perfect and the enemy ran right into the bomblets and started detonating them just as the friendlies reached the safety of the bomb crater. As soon as the friendlies were in position, more bomblets were dropped. After sowing a mine field, the Skyraiders continued to fire rockets at the enemy force. A helicopter soon arrived for the pickup. Aggressive Skyraiders

¹⁷⁷ H633SOW, Volume III, January – March 1969, 9.

¹⁷⁸ Reeves interview, 52–53.

attacks kept the remaining enemy down. The helicopter successfully extracted the SOG team without receiving ground fire from the enemy.”¹⁷⁹

Combat flying was dangerous and the 6th ACS lost its first two pilots in May 1968. The first, Captain Lyn D. Oberdier was killed in action on 5 May. The squadron had just recovered when Lieutenant Colonel Wallace A. Ford was shot down on 24 May. Colonel Ford attacked a ZPU-4 used in support of an enemy ground attack on a Special Forces camp. The ZPU-4 was a towed, quadruple barreled, 14.5-millimeter antiaircraft weapon. Ford’s Skyraider crashed near the camp and after three attempts, the soldiers were successful and recovered the pilot’s remains. After the news of the loss was announced a cloud seemed to hang over the squadron. Another pilot loss occurred on June 23, 1968 when aircraft 52-134568, *Tickles* crashed just off the Pleiku Air Base runway as the Skyraider was returning from a late night scramble. The exact circumstances of the crash cause were not known and Captain Richard Russell was listed as killed in action. It was believed that the aircraft may have been struck by enemy ground fire at the location where the primary alert aircraft had completed their mission and the secondary aircraft had only been present for a short period.¹⁸⁰

On July 15, 1968, Air Commando unit designations changed to Special Operation squadron and wing. Pacific Air Forces Special Order G-163 directed the change, and created the 633rd Special Operations Wing at Pleiku Air Base. The wing had only one flying unit assigned, the 6th Special Operations Squadron.¹⁸¹ Many air commandos despised the new designations. The old term indicated a warrior and had a history dating back to World War II. The new term,

¹⁷⁹ Reeves interview, 53 - 54.

¹⁸⁰ Ballmes interview and the author’s recollection.

¹⁸¹ PH633SOW, July – September 1968, 2.

“special operations,” had no history. Furthermore, the acronym used to describe a special operations wing was SOW. No warrior wanted anything to do with a term that also meant pig!¹⁸²

The SOG mission was an extremely hazardous operation. Two squadron pilots were lost to enemy ground fire while providing SOG teams support during the quarter of July-September 1968. The squadron lost Major Wayne B. Wolfkeil in aircraft 52-135326 on 9 August 1968. Major Wolfkeil, Spad 36, was flying a Tigerhound west of Ben Het Special Forces Camp. On his first CBU pass, Wolfkeil took heavy automatic weapons fire from the ground. The flight leader and FAC observed Spad 36 enter a sharp bank and impact in a wooded area northeast of the target. No parachute or signs of survival were detected and Major Wolfkeil was listed as missing in action. Then on 29 September, 1968, Captain Wayne E. Newberry flying another Tigerhound alert sortie in aircraft 52-135305, call sign Spad 04, northeast of Dak Pek Special Forces Camp. Severe weather and terrain limited Spad 04 to one attack heading. After heavy enemy ground fire, Spad 04 impacted on a hillside while pulling off after the second napalm pass. No parachute or beeper was detected. Captain Newberry was listed as missing in action.¹⁸³

On a night Prairie Fire mission, two Skyraiders diverted to support a SOG team that was in danger of being overrun by hostile forces. The ground commander stated he was on to something big due to the intensity of the attacking forces. Working in complete darkness and not knowing the ground team’s exact location, two A-1s made a series of passes and moved their ordnance closer to the friendlies on each succeeding pass. The ground team corrected the drops in relation to the previous pass. On next to the last pass, hostile force muzzle flashes firing into the friendly perimeter were spotted. With approval of the ground commander, the two A-1s

¹⁸² Ballmes interview.

¹⁸³ PH633SOW, Volume III, January – March 1969, 21. (Tigerhound was the code name for the southern portion of Laos.)

attacked positions within 50 meters of the friendly position, setting off a series of secondary explosions that continued through the night and forcing the enemy to withdraw.¹⁸⁴

After pilots completed a mission, they returned to Pleiku, landed and taxied into the revetment area. Pilots were helped exit the aircraft and document problems discovered during the flight. They went into Operations for mission debriefs. Normally, aircraft were quick turned and readied for flight. A small warehouse tug pushed the aircraft tail-first into the revetments and the crew chief began a post-flight inspection for any damage or problems.¹⁸⁵

During one post-flight inspection, battle damage was found on the aircraft's engine. The pilot thought the aircraft had been hit during one pass. The crew chief discovered holes and cuts in engine push rod tubes, nicks in propeller blades, and cuts in the armor shield behind the propeller. He discovered a large piece of metal wrapped around one push rod tube. The metal was twisted and measured about a foot in length. It was not from the aircraft. After documenting the damage, the crew chief walked to Operations and asked for the pilot. He waited outside, not wanting to cause any embarrassment in front of other pilots. Lieutenant Colonel Swain came out and the crew chief presented him the piece of twisted metal and asked "How close were you to your wingman when he dropped his bombs?" The colonel got a little red in the face and declared "Ahaaaa . . . too close!"¹⁸⁶

After completing the post-flight inspection, the crew chiefs called for fuel trucks like the ones that provide fuel to a corner gas station. The truck pulls in front of the aircraft and the crew chief first clips a static ground wire to a special designated rod in the ramp. These rods are grounding locations. They direct any static electricity into the ground, and were called "static

¹⁸⁴ PH633SOW, October – December 1968, 18.

¹⁸⁵ Beam and McAskill interviews.

¹⁸⁶ Author's recollection.

grounding points.”¹⁸⁷ While the crew chief “grounded” the fuel truck, another maintainer pushed a big fire extinguisher toward the front of the aircraft in case of an emergency. Both maintainers checked the ground wires and the aircraft was fueled and the amount signed for. The fuel truck moved off to the next aircraft as one truck filled multiple aircraft.¹⁸⁸

Following the fuel tanker was another smaller truck. This truck carried engine oil and the servicing procedures were similar. The oil tank held 36 gallons.¹⁸⁹ Once servicing of fuel and oil was completed, the aircraft forms annotated, and the fuel load given to the maintenance section; they reported the aircraft status to Operations. The aircraft may or may not have ordnance on it. This depended on whether the aircraft was scheduled to fly again or not. After each flight, the 20-millimeter cannon were loaded. Once maintenance of the 20-millimeter guns was completed, the armament specialists inserted a red plastic cone-shaped plug in the cannon barrel. The plug prevented anything from entering the barrel. Not a bad idea when armed with high explosive incendiary rounds that would explode when striking anything, including things in the barrel.¹⁹⁰

Alert duty at Pleiku involved both maintainers and pilots. Four alert revetments were located close to Operations. The Alert Skyraiders had been inspected by both crew chiefs and pilots. After the Skyraiders were inspected, their status was reported to the command post or Tactical Unit Operations Center (TUOC). TUOC would report the alert aircraft were “cocked” to higher headquarters. “Cocked” meant that the aircraft were ready for scramble. Time was the most important part of alert duty. In Operations, the pilots prepared for any emergency missions. Maintainers designated for alert tried to work on aircraft near the cocked Skyraiders. There were

¹⁸⁷ ARH, Photo on page 49.

¹⁸⁸ Beam and McAskill interviews.

¹⁸⁹ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 1-61.

¹⁹⁰ Ballmes interview.

not enough crew chiefs to be designated to stand by the cocked aircraft and wait. Both reacted when an alert klaxon sounded and the maintainers normally arrived before the pilots. Pilot briefings on what to expect during the scramble were often done while in flight to the target.¹⁹¹

The alert ordnance load was standardized: 790 20-millimeter rounds, a centerline 300-gallon fuel tank, and combinations of CBU, napalm, and rocket launchers. Some pilots left their parachute harnesses and survival vests hanging on the aircraft. Aircraft switches were positioned for engine start. Auxiliary generators were started and provided power to the aircraft as the pilots climbed into the Skyraiders. Every action was planned, fine tuned, and reduced to minimum time; from sounding of the alert klaxon to the aircraft takeoff. During a scramble, maintainers and pilots followed strict safety precautions.¹⁹²

The alert aircraft joined up and headed toward a rendezvous with a FAC. The Skyraiders informed the FAC of their ordnance and the FAC briefed them on the situation. Scrambles were often in support of Operation Prairie Fire. While their job was to observe the enemy as they moved troops and supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, SOG teams were to avoid firefights as they would be hopelessly outnumbered. Insertion was done by South Vietnamese Air Force helicopters using the call sign “Kingbee.”¹⁹³ Using South Vietnamese Air Force helicopters was an attempt to cover the fact that the United States was waging a secret war in Laos. If not detected, the team closed on the trail, observed, and reported enemy activities. If the team was discovered, it immediately requested extraction by helicopter. If engaged with the enemy, the

¹⁹¹ Ballmes interview.

¹⁹² Jensen interview.

¹⁹³ Jensen interview.

SOG teams often called for close air support assistance beyond the scope of Army aviation assets such as the Bell AH-1 Cobra or UH-1 Huey gunship.¹⁹⁴

Major Dineen laughed as he described a first quarter 1969 mission with Lieutenant Colonel Sid L. McNeil. Two Skyraiders had been redirected and headed toward Khe Sanh Marine base. The flight took approximately an hour and a half. A SOG team was in trouble and called for close air support. “Colonel McNeil was flight leader and had a difficult time locating the ground team. On his first pass, he released his weapons way off target. Major Dineen admitted that he was a little concerned because he had certified Colonel McNeil.” The two Skyraiders quickly redirected their efforts and the SOG team was later safely extracted.¹⁹⁵

Airman Stiff was assigned as a 6th ACS crew chief on an A-1G side-by-side Skyraider named *Jan*. The Skyraider, 52-132612, was sent to Udorn Air Base, Thailand, for installation of two strike cameras in May 1968. Stiff, aware of the rivalry between Skyraider squadrons, decided to wash the aircraft. A group of maintainers chipped in and the aircraft was cleaned up looking brand new. Stiff appreciated the help because he had been busy installing a seat in the blue room and verifying the intercom worked. He was to sit there during the flight.¹⁹⁶

The flight crew in the side-by-side Skyraider consisted of a lieutenant colonel and a major in front and Stiff in the rear. Stiff wore a chest parachute and was told if anything happened the crew would count to three before they ejected. This information startled Stiff enough so he forgot to retrieve the landing gear safety locks. The flight was uneventful until they arrived at Udorn Air Base. During the approach Stiff overheard the pilots talking about another Skyraider. The Udorn runway was constructed of PSP and was slick from the rain that

¹⁹⁴ Jensen interview.

¹⁹⁵ Dineen interview and H633CSG, January – March 1969, 21.

¹⁹⁶ Stiff letter.

had just drenched the surface. While facing rearward, Stiff saw a large cloud of smoke and his pilot declared “I hope he made it!” A damaged Skyraider had slid off the wet runway. As they watched the unfolding drama, the co-pilot said “Slow down, slow down!” Stiff looked out of the landing Skyraider and all he could see was a C-130 Hercules. The Spad was sliding toward it. The pilot managed to regain control and miss the C-130. Still on the intercom, Stiff could not help overhearing the lieutenant colonel chew out the major. The story did not end there. After the aircraft taxied to the parking spot, the maintenance crew asked for the landing gear safety locks. Stiff recalled the grief he got when there were no locks on his aircraft. The crew asked, “Did you not know that you were going to land and needed them?” A borrowed set of safety locks were found and the Skyraider was post-flight inspected without further incident.¹⁹⁷

July–September 1968 Sorties Flown¹⁹⁸				
Sorties	JUL	AUG	Sep	TOTAL
Combat	463	468	496	1,427
Total	538	532	561	1,631
Hours	1,006	1,631	1,631	3,063
Acft in Phase	1.8	1.6	1.6	5

Lieutenant Jensen described one Prairie Fire sortie. “As the Skyraiders reached the designated site they made radio contact with a FAC. The FAC was a Cessna O-2 Skymaster using the call sign Covey.” Flying the O-2 was Lieutenant Al Rose who was known to Skyraider pilots because he lived at Pleiku. The FAC carried an Army officer who was in radio contact

¹⁹⁷ Stiff letter.

¹⁹⁸ PH633SOW, July–September 1968, 17.

with the SOG team. The Skyraiders used call sign “Spad 11” for Captain Harris and “Spad 12” for Jensen.¹⁹⁹

The Spads orbited at 7,000 feet and waited for the helicopters to arrive. Jensen stated:

He slid the canopy back as a primitive form of air conditioning to keep cool from the tropical heat and humidity of the Laotian skies. As the helicopters approached, Jensen listened to the FM radio the Army officer was using to talk to the SOG team. The plan was to set two Kingbee helicopters on a landing zone (LZ). A LZ was a flat piece of land or an opening in the forest big enough for the helicopter to safely land. The Skyraider pilots listened to the FM conversations, but were not supposed to talk except in a dire emergency. It took about ten minutes to complete the plan and everything was quiet.²⁰⁰

Finally, radio silence was broken by the SOG team who whispered over the radio. The hair on the back of Jensen’s neck stood straight up as they stated “There are North Vietnamese Army soldiers that appear to be looking for us.” Jensen understood that the Skyraiders might be soon engaged. Sliding the canopy forward and tightening the shoulder straps, Jensen heard:

“Spad 12 — Push’em up, set’em up, and go internal.” This warning from lead reminded the wingman to adjust the throttle, propeller, and mixture controls to combat settings; check weapons switches for correct position, except for the Master Arm Switch,²⁰¹ and rotate the fuel selector to MAIN or the internal tank.²⁰² During combat, the fuel selector was turned to MAIN to ensure the engine would not run out of fuel during extremely aggressive maneuvers demanded during combat. Just after completing these actions, Covey told the Skyraiders to “watch for his smoke rocket” as he marked the enemy’s position and set up for the first attack run.²⁰³

The Skyraiders watched as the FAC made his pass. Both pilots focused their attention on the plume of white smoke that rose up from the jungle. Covey called “Spad flight, hit 100 meters west of my smoke, attack heading 360.” Spad 11 lined up for a strafing pass while Jensen

¹⁹⁹ Jensen interview and Wendell A. Kerr, USAF, Master Sergeant, Unit historian History of the 633rd Special Operations Wing, April–June 1969, 6th Special Operations Squadron Attachment, 6. (Hereinafter referred to as KH633SOW, date, and page number.)

²⁰⁰ Jensen interview.

²⁰¹ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 8-3.

²⁰² NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 4-16.

²⁰³ Jensen interview.

maneuvered into position to follow lead and listen for corrections from the FAC. Covey called “Spad 12, hit 20 meters east of Spad 11.” Jensen adjusted to the new aim point and fired a two second burst of 20-millimeter cannon fire. The ground team asked for ordnance to be dropped closer to their position causing Jensen’s heart to race. His greatest fear was to drop ordnance inadvertently on friendly forces, killing them. Friendly fire incidents are termed “fratricide.”²⁰⁴

Covey put in another smoke rocket and advised the Skyraiders to “continue using the same attack heading and the SOG team had laid out a 10 by 10 foot orange marker panel to help keep track of their position.” Covey added “They will also flash a signal mirror during the Skyraider passes in order to identify their precise positions.” Spad 11 rolled in on his pass and right after he rolled wing level, erupted into a stream of flames about twice the length of the aircraft. “Spad 11 your on fire, you’re on fire!” Jensen screamed into the UHF radio, expecting to see Harris eject from the wounded aircraft. Instead, Harris jettisoned his entire load of ordnance and executed a normal pull off from the target.²⁰⁵ He advised Jensen he had been hit in one of the napalm tanks by ground fire, but otherwise the Skyraider was undamaged and flyable. This changed the tactical situation dramatically. The SOG team was under direct threat by a numerically superior North Vietnamese Army forces. The Skyraider flight had only half of its ordnance remaining with lead limited to staffing passes until the 20-millimeter ammunition his aircraft carried was expended. Jensen was the only factor that could help the SOG team. He had to deliver his remaining ordnance until a second pair of Skyraiders could be scrambled and arrive on station. That would take approximately 30 minutes.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴ Jensen interview.

²⁰⁵ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 8-7.

²⁰⁶ Jensen interview.

The Skyraiders continued to make passes at the enemy forces holding them off the SOG team. Lead used his 20-millimeter guns effectively, alternating fake gun passes with strafing passes while Jensen dropped his remaining ordnance sparingly. These actions effectively blocked enemy advances. It came as a great relief when the attacking Skyraiders heard another Skyraider flight, Spad 21 and 22, check in with Covey. As Covey briefed the incoming Skyraiders, Jensen made his last pass and rejoined Harris for the return flight back to Pleiku. Although the time had passed quickly Jensen recalled they had been delivering ordnance for an hour, making a total of twenty-three passes. That evening Harris and Jensen learned that the SOG team had been successfully rescued and returned to their Special Forces base camp.²⁰⁷

The next day, Jensen was surprised when his crew chief presented him an enemy bullet that had been discovered during the post-flight inspection. Jensen sent the bullet to his wife back in the states. He explained that this was his “golden BB” which meant he could not be shot down since he had the bullet with his name on it.” Jensen recalled the experience and stated “For me, the people mattered, Ruf Harris (Spad 11), Al Rose (Covey), and the Army SOG team. The old low and slow Skyraider proved their worth and the result was lives saved, period.”²⁰⁸

When an Army patrol was attacked, the 6th ACS alert aircraft responded. Major Dineen explained that “the patrol was hunkered down in an old bomb crater as the enemy force closed in. Dineen’s Skyraider was loaded with general purpose bombs while his wingman, Major Gene “Skinny” McGinnis’ Skyraider was loaded with napalm and CBU. They commenced their attacks and dropped ordnance as close as 50 meters from the good guys. Dineen remarked:

We had to be very careful, especially with napalm. In order to conserve ordnance and keep the enemy deterred, the two Skyraiders mixed dry passes with weapons passes.

²⁰⁷ Jensen interview.

²⁰⁸ Jensen interview.

They made numerous passes and convinced the enemy to withdraw. The team was rescued by helicopters and the Skyraiders returned to Pleiku. It was a good mission.²⁰⁹

The R-3350 engine was a solid performer, but could be a handful. Airman Stiff recalled problems on his A-1G after an engine change. The new engine leaked worse than the one it replaced. There was a tremendous amount of oil coming out of the exhaust stacks during engine operation. Stiff told everybody that the engine was not right, but no action was taken. Sometime in October 1968, while on a mission the pilot had to land at a small base called Cheo Reo southeast of Pleiku, because of engine problems. A six-man team recovered the aircraft and it was air lifted by an Army CH-64 Flying Crane heavy lift helicopter. The engine was inspected and thoroughly checked out at the engine run area. With the tail wheel chained down, the engine was run at full power, but the problem could not be duplicated. A few weeks later, another mission ended when the pilot had to land at a fire support base called Song Be. Another crew hooked the Skyraider to a CH-64 for a ride back to Ben Hoa just north of Saigon. This time the engine mechanics changed the engine and the problems did not return again.²¹⁰

Skyraider missions flown out of Pleiku were demanding. Both pilots and maintainers worked hard and long hours. Aircraft launched and recovered over and over again. Pilots and maintainers became known to each other and friendships formed. It did not take too long for names to begin to show up on the unit's aircraft. One of the first was A-1H serial number 52-134568. It had the name "Tickles" painted on both sides of the engine cowling while the

Oct-Dec 1968 Sorties Flown ²¹¹				
Sorties	OCT	NOV	DEC	TOTAL

²⁰⁹ Dineen interview.

²¹⁰ Stiff letter.

²¹¹ H633SOW, October–December 1968, Volume I, 16.

Combat	618	602	726	1,946
Total	708	645	803	2,156
Hours	1,286	1,220	1,631	4,137
Acft in Phase	1	3	4	8

aircraft was being prepared at Cam Rahn Harbor.²¹² Other aircraft names quickly followed: A-1H serial number 52-137520 was called “Boisterous Ben,” A-1H serial number 52-137524 became “Little Annie Fanny,” A-1G serial number 52-13258 was “War Monger,” and A-1J serial number 52-142021 was named “Su Nan Sam” to name a few. Airman Harry Beam’s Skyraider A-1H serial number 52-142065 was named “777 Jackpot.”²¹³ Crew chief Phillip Yokcum named his A-1H “Pappy Yohum’s Country Store.”²¹⁴

Aircraft names selected were selected for many reasons. Some were a reminder about family such as Su Nan Sam. This aircraft, named by the squadron commander, Lieutenant Norm Repp was the first part of his daughters’ names Sue, Nancy and Samantha. When his crew chief asked about the name, Repp replied that it was Vietnamese for something dirty. Stretch Ballmes named his aircraft Boisterous Ben. He had flown the aircraft previously and when scheduled to fly a later mission and noticed that 520 had the same weapons load. He asked to switch aircraft and switched the pilot’s name that Operations had assigned with his own. Ballmes asked his crew chief to stencil the name on the Skyraider. Ballmes was surprised the next day to see

²¹² Author’s recollection.

²¹³ Beam interview.

²¹⁴ Phillip Yockum, Sergeant, USAF, Crew chief. Interviewed by author, Myrtle Beach, South Caroline at the Pleiku Air Base Reunion, September 18–20, 2009.

Boisterous Ben and his name on the Skyraider. He was so surprised that he gave a bottle of whiskey to the crew chief in gratitude.²¹⁵

After the loss of Skyraider 52-1343568 “Tickles,” that crew chief was offered another aircraft. It was later discovered the new aircraft, 52-137524, had been selected by Major James B. Wheeler. Wheeler wanted that crew chief to crew it. On being informed of this, the crew chief began to search for a name. While on a DaNang to Pleiku ferry flight, the crew chief and pilot talked. Lieutenant Frederick W. Butler showed the crew chief his undergraduate pilot patch. The patch depicted Playboy’s Little Annie Fanny standing astride a T-38 trainer. That evening, the crew chief scrounged some stencil cardboard and cut out the Little Annie Fanny likeness. He changed the design, removing the T-38, and replacing it with a 750-pound general purpose bomb. The next day, Skyraider 524 was named “Little Annie Fanny.” The red line stencil stood about three foot tall and was placed on both sides of the engine cowling. When Lieutenant Butler saw the newly christened Skyraider, he smiled. Aircraft naming helped morale and continued to build on the teamwork and comradery that developed in the squadron.²¹⁶

1968 6 th ACS Manning (4 th Quarter 1968)						
MONTH	OFFICERS		AIRMEN		TOTAL	
	Auth'd	Assgn'd	Auth'd	Assgn'd	Auth'd	Assgn'd
OCT	27	30	113	127	140	157
NOV	27	30	113	120	140	150
DEC	27	26	113	117	140	143

²¹⁵ Ballmes interview.

²¹⁶ Author’s recollection.

As crew chiefs and pilots named their assigned aircraft, the 6th ACS enjoyed a relatively stable manning period. Crew chiefs were experienced and worked extremely hard to provide safe aircraft for the pilots. The pilots flew aggressively and accomplished much in meeting the demands placed on them. With the stable work force, the squadron flying hours reached a new high, exceeding 4,000 in the last quarter of 1968. With a little more personnel than authorized, the 6th ACS was accomplishing its wartime mission.²¹⁷

²¹⁷ KH633SOW, Volume III, January – March 1969, 29.

CHAPTER FIVE

WHAT ARE YOUR INTENTIONS?

With the formation of the 633rd Special Operations Wing in July 15, 1968, the mission did not change much. The wing's mission was to: (a) destroy enemy forces and facilities by executing close air support and interdiction missions; (b) provide air escort for search and rescue (SAR), defoliation operations; (c) conduct visual and photographic reconnaissance missions in support of special air warfare operations; (d) maintain and operate base support facilities and provide base support service to assigned and tenant units; (e) provide for security of areas under the wing jurisdiction; and (f) carry out other missions as may be directed by the 7th Air Force commander. Colonel George P. Birdsong assumed command of the wing on its formation. The wing had only the 6th Special Operations Squadron under its direct control. All other flying squadrons and detachments at Pleiku were controlled by off-base units.²¹⁸

The Vietnam War brought many feelings to those who participated in it. Some pilots experienced the thrill of air combat. The pride of providing safe aircraft was the maintainers reward. One thing both shared was the almost monthly night mortar and rocket attacks. During the night of August 23, 1968, 122-millimeter rocket rounds hit Pleiku Air Base. Launch positions were observed about four miles northeast of the base. The base siren immediately sounded and Security Alert Condition Red was implemented. Most base personnel were aware that the base was under attack before the siren sounded. Rockets struck the cantonment area, with several impacting just outside the base perimeter. Meanwhile, Security Police forces spotted more launch positions to the northwest. At 0216, rockets impacted on the west end of the flightline and at 0219 hour the last rocket hit the base. A total of 18 rockets struck the base. Casualties included shrapnel wounds, lacerations, and abrasions. Four EC-47 aircraft were damaged. No Skyraiders or Spad personnel were hit.²¹⁹

A major engagement between air power and enemy ground forces took place in the summer of 1968. The battle for Duc Lap was considered a tactical victory when air power proved decisive.²²⁰ The battle began during the early morning hours of 24 August when Spads 01 and 02 scrambled in the first of a series of air sorties designed to break up what the United States Army described as a regiment, approximately 3,000 men, attack against the Civilian

²¹⁸ H633SOW, Volume I, July – September 1968, 4.

²¹⁹ H633SOW, Volume III, January – March 1969, 28 – 30.

²²⁰ MH633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, Letter of Appreciation, James Brooks, Captain, USA, 15.

Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) Camp and Subsector Headquarters. The camp was located six miles from the Cambodian border southwest of Ban Me Thout.²²¹

Night missions were used to counter enemy attacks. For maintainers, night operations emphasized the dangerous aspects of their jobs. With reduced visibility and those big propellers- turning, crew chiefs had to be completely aware of their environment at all times. Pilots were aware of the differences during night missions also. Major Dineen recalled one night mission with a certain twinkle in his eye. After retiring, he opened a real estate office in Florida. Dineen was interviewing a prospective new agent and they somehow started talking about Vietnam. The individual stated he was a retired USAF master sergeant and mechanic. He told of his combat experience in Vietnam. On his first Vietnam tour, he was in Special Forces and assigned as a UH-1 Huey helicopter door gunner. He talked about a trip to Duc Lap Army Special Forces camp on August 24, 1968. The agent stated he was on one of two Huey helicopters that had been sent to assist in the evacuation of the field.²²²



²²¹ PH633SOW, Volume I, July – September 1968, 19.

²²² Dineen interview and PH633SOW, Volume I, July – September 1968, 19.

Skyraider left rear quarter view.²²³

North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops attacked in force and the Army decided to abandon the base. Air power was called in to destroy the attackers after evacuation. The two helicopters landed and filled with passengers, but the second chopper experienced a mechanical problem. The agent left his helicopter to help. The problem was minor and quickly fixed. The repaired chopper departed. When the agent turned to return to his chopper, it was gone. Left alone, he found a command bunker and was about to barricade himself inside it when he discovered a drunk Army cook. Both men had been inadvertently left behind and were now in the same predicament. They barricaded themselves in and could hear the enemy outside. That night, air strikes rained weapons of all kinds onto the base, breaking up the attack. The next day the two individuals were rescued when Army forces returned to retake the base.²²⁴ Dineen stated “I checked my old flight log as Duc Lap sounded familiar and discovered I had flown two night missions dropping napalm on the enemy overrun Special Forces base.”²²⁵

Air power pinned the enemy down and allowed CIDG and South Vietnamese Army reinforcements to counterattack and rescue the strategically important camp. Duc Lap was in the center of a major communist infiltration route and saw some of the heaviest fighting waged in the area. More than 400 sorties were flown throughout the week, decimating enemy troop concentrations and blocking enemy attacks. The wing Skyraiders played a major roll in the Duc Lap victory as they delivered more than 100 tons of ordnance in 54 sorties. Observers were unanimous in praise of the Spads’ efforts in turning the tide of battle.²²⁶

Skyraiders from all squadrons flew in the Duc Lap battle. One afternoon, Skyraiders flooded DaNang Air Base, where they wanted fuel and ordnance so they could return to the battle. Skyraiders waited in any open space, and some parked near the Pleiku SAR area. The Pleiku aircraft had returned and maintainers inspected, refueled, and rearmed them as fast as possible. Once this was accomplished and the aircraft were cocked, the pace slowed down. Crew chiefs began to clean the oil stains removing them with hydraulic fluid-soaked rags. One of the sister squadron pilots walked over to the maintainers and demanded to know what they were doing. The pilot wanted help turning his aircraft as base transit section was swamped and unable to ready them. The detachment maintainers

²²³ ARH, *Skyraider left rear quarter view*.

²²⁴ Dineen interview.

²²⁵ Dineen interview.

²²⁶ H633SOW, Volume I, July – September 1968, 20.

pitched in and completed thru-flight inspections. Next, they refueled and rearmed the visiting Skyraiders. Last, they cleaned the canopies thoroughly, but did not clean off the thick built-up oil and exhaust deposits. They felt that job belonged to the aircraft's crew chief. The Pleiku crew chiefs also noted an unusual feature on the visiting NKP Skyraiders. Some aircraft had one name on the left and a different name on the right side. Along with the aircraft names were different crew chief and pilot names. The Pleiku maintainers shook their heads at what they considered an unusual practice.²²⁷

On October 14, 1968, Lieutenant Colonel Alexander E. Cory, the 6th ACS commander, accepted a plaque with a mounted AK-47 captured during the battle for Duc Lap. Under the weapon was inscribed: "To the 6th ACS for outstanding work during the Battle for Duc Lap." The presentation was made by Major James Brooks, U. S. Army advisor. Standing at attention, the Spad Squadron listened to the words of praise and thanks for their outstanding work.²²⁸

After a DaNang Skyraider returned from a flight, maintainers discovered a main landing gear tire had a large slash in it. The damaged tire had to be replaced. The detachment maintained a small WRSK package with one spare tire and wheel assembly, but it had already been used. DaNang supply reported it did not have a Skyraider tire and Pleiku could not send one until the next day. That meant one alert Skyraider down for a bad tire. This was not acceptable. One crew chief went over to the South Vietnamese Skyraider squadron and asked if it would let the Pleiku Alert Skyraiders borrow a wheel and tire assembly. The "borrowed" wheel and tire would be returned as soon as a replacement arrived from Pleiku. No problem they said as they were glad to help the Americans who were helping them. The aircraft was repaired and ready for alert. Just another day for the Skyraiders maintainers. Teamwork, this time between maintainers of different nations.²²⁹

Captain "Stretch" Ballmes, flying an A-1E, the side-by-side Skyraider, remembered one mission: "We had been told to use the 20-millimeter guns sparingly, only for 'lucrative' targets i.e., something important."²³⁰ Flying a two-ship mission with Lieutenant Colonel Swain, a FAC declared "he had some targets for them." When asked about the targets, the FAC explained "they were indeed lucrative" and the air attack began. Following Colonel

²²⁷ Author's recollection.

²²⁸ MH633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 15.

²²⁹ Author's recollection.

²³⁰ Ballmes interview.

Swain down to the target, Stretch fired the four 20-millimeter cannons and after only four or five rounds, one gun exploded. Colonel Swain notified Ballmes via radio “he was on fire.” When flying the A-1E, the pilot sat in the left seat and the view of the right side of the aircraft was restricted. He could see the right wing gun area and the fire burning as a result of the gun explosion. Swain told him “you are trailing fire!” Stretch answered “Roger.” Swain asked “What are your intentions?” Ballmes answered “I am going to slip the aircraft and try to extinguish the fire.” This was part of the emergency procedures. The slip did not put the fire out and Stretch climbed for altitude. “More altitude translated into longer time to make decisions.”²³¹

At 8,000 feet Captain Ballmes could see DaNang in the distance. Landing there was definitely preferred to an ejection over the enemy and uncertain rescue. Heading toward the base and making contact with the control tower, they asked “What are your intentions?” Stretch decreased altitude making a 720 degree descending circle, but the fire was still burning. He thought he would crash land in the grass between the two runways. After thinking about a crash landing, Stretch saw DaNang harbor and decided to eject over the water. The tower asked “What are your intentions?” and Stretch responded “I will punch out over the bay. I pushed the power up and headed toward the water. The engine responded normally. All was going well until a big white hospital ship with huge red crosses on its side was observed moored in the middle of the bay. ‘I can not punch out here,’ Stretch thought, ‘the plane might hit that ship.’ He turned again toward DaNang.” The tower again asked “What are your intentions?” and Stretch answered “He would punch out over the mountains near the base.”²³²

After turning away from the harbor and heading toward the mountains, Ballmes saw a large Marine bivouac where he wanted to escape the burning aircraft. He could not eject over them. Colonel Swain, who had been following, came up on the radio and declared: “The fire is out and your gear is moving.” The fire had burned through the up-lock hydraulic lines, freeing the right main landing gear. When the aircraft slowed, the weight of the gear moved it. Placing the landing gear selector lever to DOWN, Stretch was surprised to see three green lights indicating the gear was down and locked. He continued: “the future immediately looked brighter.” He notified the tower and declared: “My intention is to land!”²³³

²³¹ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 5-4.

²³² Ballmes interview.

²³³ Ballmes interview.

But the aircraft and pilot were not out of danger. Without hydraulic pressure, the flaps, speed brakes, and aircraft brakes were disabled. Their use slowed the aircraft down. It would take solid airmanship to land the stricken aircraft. Landing at 200 knots indicated airspeed, the aircraft took a long time to stop “flying.” Without flaps and aircraft brakes, every time Stretch eased the stick backward the aircraft continued to fly. Nearing the runway end, the aircraft lost enough airspeed and turned off the active runway. The incident experienced by Captain Ballmes was not covered in the -1 Flight Manual Emergency Instructions. Gun explosions followed the Skyraider throughout the war.²³⁴

The 6th ACS received new airmen and pilots throughout the time it was at Pleiku Air Base. Replacements arrived without much fanfare, but one sergeant had a different welcome. Skyraider crew chief sergeant Peter J. McAskill explained:

Travel started from Boston, Massachusetts on August 25, 1969. The aircraft made stops in Washington State, Alaska, and Japan only to refuel. Passengers were allowed off the aircraft to stretch their legs and get some fresh air, but were not allowed to leave the immediate area. Setting in a cramped seat for too many hours causes your back to get mighty sore. Plus, I was sweating not only from the uniform I was wearing, but also from the thoughts of going to Vietnam. I didn’t know what to expect: sure seeing the reports on TV was frightening, but the thought of actually going there was even *more* frightening. It always happened to the *other* guy, but *I* was on my way to a place that I didn’t want to go. Other guys were dying left and right, with many more being injured.²³⁵

The flight terminated at Cam Ranh Air Base on August 26, 1969. When the aircraft door opened, McAskill recalled: “the most oppressive heat and humidity I had ever experienced. I knew I had worn the wrong uniform for the flight, summer dress blues!” Summer dress blues were a formal uniform and were heavy for the Vietnamese climate. The young sergeant had wanted to impress his new girlfriend with his dashing look in USAF blue. Added was that the weather in Boston was a little cool and McAskill’s parents had never seen him in uniform. He added, “Who knew if I was coming back?” At Cam Ranh Air Base, McAskill was given an orientation on what to expect, not to expect, base living arrangements, chow hall location, etc. He was told to be at the passenger terminal for air transportation to Pleiku the next morning.²³⁶

²³⁴ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 5-1 - 5-15.

²³⁵ Peter J. McAskill, Sergeant, USAF, crew chief. Interviewed by author, Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, Pleiku Air Base Reunion, 18–20 September 2009. (Hereinafter referred to as McAskill interview.)

²³⁶ McAskill letter.

McAskill was assigned to a temporary quarters bunk for the night. The bunk was located in a ten-man tent. The bathroom or latrine was a common area type with little privacy. The sergeant decided he wanted to clean up and take a long cool shower. With some helpful directions, McAskill found the shower. It was a large room with a pipe running along the four walls with showerheads spaced every five feet. He stripped, turned on the water, and started to wash when all of a sudden a “mama san” came in. The shower floor was concrete and that is where “mama sans” did the laundry. McAskill remembered:

She was nothing to look at, old looking though probably in her mid-30's with black teeth from eating beetle nut (it's a kind of a narcotic). She looked up at him, saw what he had, and must have figured, “when you've seen one naked GI, you've seen them all.” I hurried up and finished the shower leaving the mama san to her work. The next day I caught a Lockheed C-130 Hercules transport aircraft to Pleiku. Upon arrival at Pleiku, I noticed it was a little bit cooler and realized that the base was up in the central highlands of Vietnam, but it was still hot and humid.

After joining the squadron, McAskill received an orientation on where things were and what to expect. Part of the briefing covered dining hall food, including the announcement that everyone had to be tested once a month for worms. A special briefing covered what to do during mortar and rocket attacks and where bomb shelters were located. These shelters were dug into the ground, framed with heavy timbers, and covered with metal roofs. The whole structure was covered with sandbags. The walls were two to three bags deep and the roof had two rows, some were even thicker. The entrance had a front wall to protect individuals from shrapnel if a mortar or rocket exploded near the entrance.²³⁷

On a mission near Saigon, the capitol of the Republic of Vietnam, Major Dineen recalled:

I was about 50 or so miles north of the Saigon and cruising along when I noticed that the chip warning light had illuminated. I immediately reduced power and began to look for somewhere to land the Skyraider before the engine seized. The chip light was guaranteed to get a pilots attention. The Skyraider did not fly for very long without the big R-3350 running. The only safe spot was a small dirt runway that was used by some FACS to stage out of. I decided to put the Skyraider down there and arrange for a flight back to Pleiku. The landing was uneventful. I made contact with Pleiku; and informed them of the aircraft and his predicament. Pleiku responded that they would send a maintenance team down to the dirt strip to remove the aircraft the next day.²³⁸

Dineen was told to stay the night; no transportation was available to return him to Pleiku. The major looked around and realized the Skyraider offered the enemy a big target. Dineen stated: “I spent an uneventful evening and was surprised to see the Skyraider intact.” The next day a team arrived and readied the Skyraider for a helicopter ride to

²³⁷ McAskill letter.

²³⁸ Dineen interview.

Pleiku. A ground crew attached long cables to the aircraft and these were hooked on an Army CH-54 Flying Crane helicopter. The CH-54 lifted the Skyraider off the ground and the dangling aircraft was stabilized by a small parachute that helped keep it pointed in one correct direction and not twist around.²³⁹

On October 28, 1968, the 633rd SOW received a Pacific Air Force message restricting all Skyraiders due to an A-1 accident at Hurlburt Field, Florida. An instructor and student were pulling out of a rocket run when the wing failed. Both were fatalities. PACAF restricted all Skyraiders to 3G straight ahead, 2G rolling pull out maneuvers, and a maximum airspeed of 270 knots. The restriction remained until a depot team inspected all main wing spars for cracks.²⁴⁰

A depot team from San Antonio Air Material Area, Kelly Air Force Base, Texas, arrived approximately three weeks later. Initially, the team made a cursory examination and cleared all aircraft without cracks for 100 hours of unrestricted flight, until repair kits arrived and the aircraft were modified with a permanent fix. This “Band-Aid Fix” consisted of a thin metal spar cap running from gear well to gear well, on the outside of the aircraft skin, and directly under the main wing spar. The repair required approximately 1,000 man-hours for each aircraft. By December 31, 1968, eight Skyraiders had been modified and another three were scheduled for the modification.²⁴¹

Skyraider missions continued while the depot team worked. Sorties were varied and challenging. Providing armed escort for other aircraft could become very interesting. Captain “Stretch” Ballmes remembered:

We were tasked to provide escort for a flight of Fairchild C-123 Provider aircraft just across the border in Laos. These “Ranch Hand” aircraft were modified to carry the defoliant Agent Orange.²⁴² This mission was to defoliate an area where the enemy had built a road called “Hala’s Highway” after the FAC who discovered it. The road was almost impossible to see from the air through the dense foliage.²⁴³

The mission brief expected some ground fire and enemy resistance. The battle plan was led by the Covey FAC who discovered the highway. Closely following the FAC were two Skyraiders that would use high explosive incendiary rockets and CBU-25s. The C-123s followed in a right echelon formation, just 200-feet above the trees. On either

²³⁹ Dineen interview.

²⁴⁰ MH633SOW, October – December 1968, 19 – 20.

²⁴¹ MH633SOW, October – December 1968, 21.

²⁴² Ballmes interview and MH633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 13.

²⁴³ MH633SOW, October – December 1968, 21.

side of the Ranch Hands, two more Skyraiders delivering more of the same ordnance as the lead Spads. The maneuver was designed to keep the enemies heads down.²⁴⁴ In spite of the cover, the Ranch Hands took heavy accurate ground fire; it was obvious the enemy did not want their highway exposed. Ballmes continued:

During the run in to the target area, the enemy opened up with heavy and very accurate antiaircraft gun fire. One of the Ranch Hand aircraft was hit hard knocking out one reciprocating engine on one wing and the jet engine on the opposite wing. The stricken Provider was severely damaged and wobbled through the air as it pulled up and headed away from the enemy location.²⁴⁵

The C-123 Provider was originally built with two radial engines, but later, two under-wing jet engines were added to increase performance. The damaged Ranch Hand trailed smoke and flames.²⁴⁶ The Ranch Hand pilot pulled off the target and Ballmes tried to direct the C-123 toward Pleiku Air Base for an emergency landing. One can only imagine the excitement in the Ranch Hand flight station as the pilot was trying to fly the battle-damaged aircraft to safety. During the flight the Ranch Hand crew feathered the damaged engine and extinguished the fire in the jet motor.²⁴⁷ The pilot saw Camp Holloway, home of a large Army helicopter aviation unit. Helicopters were spread out over the open field, but were not easily seen due to the charged atmosphere in the damaged aircraft cockpit. No matter what Stretch tried, the C-123 lined up with what he thought was an aircraft runway. Ballmes declared: "I tried to get his attention visually because he was not answering the radios." They were not working due to engine malfunctions. Ballmes stated: "Nothing I did resulted in a change of direction."²⁴⁸

The C-123 pilot saw what he believed was a safe landing area. Just prior to landing, he recognized the area was full of Army helicopters and pulled up, gaining altitude. Ballmes finally got his attention and pointed out Pleiku Air Base, just across the valley. The damaged C-123 made a safe landing. Later that night, when Stretch talked to the pilot, he realized that he had met him during training at Hurlburt. Captain Ballmes could not resist saying: "Man that was exciting! Let's go do that again!" The pilot's reaction is not printable.²⁴⁹ The mission, as it turned

²⁴⁴ H633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 13.

²⁴⁵ Ballmes interview.

²⁴⁶ MH633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 13.

²⁴⁷ MH633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 13.

²⁴⁸ Ballmes interview.

²⁴⁹ Ballmes interview.

out, was successful. “Hala’s Highway” was no longer hidden underneath thick jungle foliage. The leaves had fallen and later, tree branches began to fall.²⁵⁰

Daily life at Pleiku Air Base was not all combat missions and work. Sometimes there was special excitement, usually at night. Base Intelligence warned of increased enemy activity around Pleiku Air Base in early November 1968. At 0132 hours, November 21, 1968, 122-millimeter rockets began to strike the base. Muzzle flashes had been noted from the northeast of the base, at a distance of approximately six miles. The base siren and Giant Voice, a loud speaker system, were immediately activated and Security Alert Condition Red was implemented. Rockets struck the petroleum oil lubricant (POL) section and open storage areas in transportation and supply. Security Police forces spotted other rocket launch positions to the northwest and the launch positions had counter-battery artillery fire directed at them. At 0140 hours the attack ended. Twenty-four rockets struck the base. Personnel injuries were minor shrapnel wounds, lacerations, and abrasions. Facility and material damage was minimal. Only one NCO dormitory was damaged. The 122-millimeter rocket made a distinctive crackling noise when it was airborne. Those who heard it remember the distinctive sound.²⁵¹

Another rocket attack occurred at 0147 hours on December 23, 1968. The first 17 rounds of 122-millimeter rockets began to hit Pleiku Air Base, in the cantonment area, and two impacted in the Vietnamese Air Force Housing Area. The base siren and Giant Voice were activated and Security Alert Condition Red was set. Friendly artillery answered back and 15 minutes later the attack ceased. Casualties consisted of three men with shrapnel wounds. Three EC-47 aircraft parked in an open area with out revetment cover sustained light damage. In addition, one building was destroyed and two were heavily damaged. One rocket damaged the pierced steel planking in the west aircraft parking area.²⁵²

The number of squadron Skyraiders during October - December rose to twenty-two aircraft. The squadrons total monthly averaged 1393 hours. Monthly combat sorties averaged 852. The maintenance rates were also remarkable. Phase inspections were completed and when added to the time lost to the spar repair TCTO, demonstrated the outstanding maintenance being completed in the Skyraider Squadron.²⁵³ In December 1968, the 6th ACS

²⁵⁰ MH633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 14.

²⁵¹ MH633SOW, October – December 1968, 27.

²⁵² MH633SOW, October – December 1968, 29.

²⁵³ MH633SOW, October – December 1968, 35.

maintenance was evaluated by the Pacific Air Force Maintenance Standardization Evaluation Team. A satisfactory rating was achieved, with only five minor discrepancies. The team stated: “The aircraft were clean and maintained in a safe, reliable status.”²⁵⁴



Skyraider in flight.²⁵⁵

The Ho Chi Minh trail flowed out of southern North Vietnam through Laos, Cambodia, and into South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese use the trail to support their military. Due to the amount of troops and supplies moving south, the trail was a high priority target. The North Vietnamese fortified the route while Americans and South Vietnamese attacked it. It was a very dangerous place and was protected by numerous antiaircraft weapons. Captain Stretch Ballmes admitted he liked to use the AN-M 41 six-pack fragmentation bombs. Using them often resulted in secondary explosions and solid bomb damage assessment reported by FACS.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁴ MH633SOW, October – December 1968, 36.

²⁵⁵ ARH, *Skyraider in Flight*. Under the wing stains from the 20-milimeter cannon are visible. The belly speed brake is partially opened just aft of the wing in front of the loop antenna. Without ordnance or drop tanks the aircraft is most likely on a check flight.

²⁵⁶ Ballmes interview.

The trail was often a target for 6th ACS pilots. Depending on the type of ordnance carried by the Skyraiders, delivery methods changed. General purpose bombs were released from several thousand feet, while napalm was dropped from much lower altitudes, sometimes fifty to one hundred feet. Major Reeves stated:

Quite often, when pilots were not sure of the exact target location, lead would drop down to very low altitude and look under the trees for targets. The wingman flew at 1,000 feet and about a quarter mile back. If lead got shot at, then the wingman would try to destroy that position. Another method was watching for dust coming up off the trails. Any traffic using the Ho Chi Minh Trail was definitely an enemy target.²⁵⁷

Maintainers worked on other aircraft when their assigned aircraft were flying or off station. They worked twelve-hour days and sometimes longer when needed. If the crew chief's aircraft was in for phase inspection, most tried to work there, but more often the need was greater for flightline support. Sometimes crew chiefs did some of the inspection work themselves. In other cases, they requested paint shop personnel to touch up the aircraft paint scheme. One unofficial paint scheme was to lower the line separating the upper surface colors from the white underside. Another effort was to paint the inboard wing pylon leading edge the same dark green as the top of the wing, instead of the white.²⁵⁸

Hung weapons were occasionally a problem. Pilots tried different maneuvers and abrupt control stick inputs to try to forcefully jettison hung weapons. When nothing worked, the pilot declared an emergency, and landed with the hung bomb. Captain Stretch Ballmes explained his unique experience with a hung bomb. It was an M 66A2 2,000-pound general purpose bomb carried on the aircraft's centerline station. No matter what maneuver he tried, the bomb would not jettison. Even the bomb ejector failed to free the jammed weapon.²⁵⁹ Extremely confident in his flying skills, the captain decided to return to Pleiku and land. He felt that "armament could remove the hung bomb." Executing a flawless landing, he was surprised to feel a thumping under the aircraft. He realized that the 2,000-pound bomb had dropped off and was bouncing under the aircraft between the landing gear. Not knowing if the bomb was safe or armed, he pushed the throttle up and took off. Ballmes saw the 2,000-pound bomb skid down the center of the runway. It continued off past the overrun. Thankfully, the big bomb did not explode."²⁶⁰

²⁵⁷ Reeves interview, 52.

²⁵⁸ Author's recollection.

²⁵⁹ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 8-5.

²⁶⁰ Ballmes interview.

Another mission assigned to the 6th ACS, was escorting two Fairchild C-123 Provider aircraft during night missions under the call sign “Triton.” This mission used modified C-123s with electronic sensors, and muffled engines to acquire interdiction targets in Laos. The Spads rendezvoused with Triton, then provided flack suppression during the period that the C-123s stayed on target. During this time, the Spads made repeated CBU attacks on the antiaircraft positions which fired an estimated 250 rounds of 23- and 37-millimeter cannon shells. “The results of the Triton mission and the presence of the Spads compared to the risks involved were very questionable,” as the wing history noted.²⁶¹

The 6th ACS suffered its fourth pilot loss when Major Paul F. Johns, was shot down on June 2, 1968. Johns was attacking enemy trucks in the Tigerhound area of southern Laos. He was listed as missing in action. Captain Ballmes recalled the night prior to Johns’ loss; they talked about a girl who Johns met while on a Rest and Relaxation in Hong Kong. The girl was beautiful, and Johns wondered if he should marry her after his tour. Ballmes replied teasingly: “Hell, if I were not married I would go after her!” Sadly, the next day Johns was lost.²⁶²

Rocket and mortar attacks were not the only type of enemy attacks on Pleiku Air Base. At 0203 hours on 21 September, 35 rounds of 75-millimeter rifle ammunition hit the base. The base siren was sounded as Alert Condition Red went into effect. Friendly artillery units in the immediate area answered back and nine minutes later the attack ceased. Base casualties were three men with shrapnel wounds. Three EC-47 aircraft took shrapnel damage. In addition there was damage to buildings, roads, steel planking on one aircraft parking area, and two vehicles.²⁶³

Squadron Skyraiders became involved with a Republic of South Korean (ROK) Army operation in November 1968. It was called Operation Peng Ma (Whitehorse) number 9. Close air support was essential in conducting a successful ground operation and resulted in numerous letters of appreciation. The letters indicated the support the squadron consistently provided to other units in the Vietnam War effort. The results reported 382 enemy soldiers killed along with nine captured. Thirty-two crew-served guns were either destroyed or captured, along with small arms weapons, ammunition, ground radios, documents, and food stocks. The ROK unit American

²⁶¹ H633SOW, Volume III, January – March 1969, 18 – 19.

²⁶² Ballmes interview.

²⁶³ H633SOW, Volume III, January – March 1969, 21.

advisors expressed their appreciation to the 6th Skyraiders. Letters of appreciation were another example of teamwork that was instilled and displayed by the squadron.²⁶⁴

In the fall of 1968, a concerted effort began on road interdiction in Laos during the night. One half of the sorties were sent to stop traffic using the cover of darkness to move undetected. Working in conjunction with Pleiku based Covey FACs; Spads struck suspected truck parks, storage areas, and any moving traffic along the routes. The Skyraiders were loaded with napalm, CBU-14s, M-41 fragmentation bombs, and CBU-24s. It became apparent the night sorties were causing damage, as ground fire intensified. On many sorties, a Skyraider received 80 or more rounds of 23- and 37-millimeter tracer fire from as many as five different antiaircraft gun sites. As one aircraft made its bomb run the wingman stayed at a higher altitude and watched. If the leader received ground fire, he pulled off, and the wingman rolled in on the newly discovered gun position. This tactic accounted for over 30 antiaircraft gun positions destroyed.²⁶⁵

In January 1969 squadron Skyraiders not on alert were used for armed reconnaissance in the Tigerhound area. Ordnance delivery restrictions and bad weather made the missions ineffective and on 19 January the Spads began “road busting” in the same area. Working closely with Pleiku-based Covey FACs, the Spad road interdiction campaign proved highly successful. During the first phase of the program 125 interdiction road cuts were made on enemy infiltration routes in southern Laos. At the same time, Spads also struck truck parks and storage areas, resulting in numerous secondary explosions. On 30 January, one of the most successful operations occurred when two Skyraider caused three road cuts on an important out-country roadway. Within the hour, another flight of Spads struck the repair crews in the same area, causing secondary fires and killing more than twenty workers. According to 7th Air Force, “the program had achieved the best results of any interdiction attempt initiated in this area.”²⁶⁶

²⁶⁴ MH633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, attached Letters of Appreciation; Robert M. Lowery Jr., Colonel, USAF, and John W. Kiernam, Lt. Col, USAF, Air Liaison Officer attached to the 9th ROK Infantry Division.

²⁶⁵ MH633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 17.

²⁶⁶ H633SOW, Volume III, January – March 1969, 22 – 23.



Skyraider rolling inverted during a dive.²⁶⁷

On 19 March 1968 the squadron's entire Skyraider fleet was grounded due to improper routing of the pendant lines on the Yankee ejection seat. An all-out effort went into effect and all aircraft were corrected by 0130 hours in 20 March. This was a "commendable maintenance achievement by the men of the 633rd CAMS and the 6th SOS flightline maintainers."²⁶⁸ Skyraider maintenance efforts was checked by Air Force during a Maintenance Standardization Evaluation Team inspection in December 1968 and achieved satisfactory ratings.²⁶⁹

Combat loss replacement Skyraiders arrived at Pleiku Air Base on August 22, 1968. Four Skyraiders joined the squadron. The aircraft, 52-137496, 52-137524, 52-134570 and 52-139821 were A-1H models. While the aircraft were welcome, three were not fully mission ready. In the hurry to get the aircraft to Vietnam, FM radio sets had not been installed. Pleiku's supply could not support the request and the needed parts were ordered from the Air Force supply system. The aircraft were carefully utilized. When an aircraft went down for an extended period, the

²⁶⁷ ARH, Skyraider inverted during a dive.

²⁶⁸ PH633SOW, July – September 1968, 36.

²⁶⁹ MH633SOW, October – December 1968, 36.

radio was removed to a new plane needing it. When the radios finally arrived and installed, the number of mission-capable aircraft rose to the squadron's full complement.²⁷⁰

In November 1968, 7th Air Force decided that Skyraiders could perform the FAC role without exceeding A-1 flight restrictions. FAC missions continued for approximately two weeks and Spads flew six FAC sorties per day. All relatively new squadron pilots were required to fly two FAC missions with the Pleiku based Covey FAC's. The old timers, who were initially familiar with the "soft" area in southern Laos, were considered FAC qualified. All the later pilots were SAR qualified and had "FAC'ed" tactical aircraft in on targets during SAR attempts. Therefore, to the majority of pilots, this was not a new mission.²⁷¹

The Skyraiders put forth a commendable showing. However, there is more to being a FAC than directing air strikes—in this secondary part of the FAC mission, the Skyraider was ill suited. The wide low wing made it almost difficult to carry out aerial reconnaissance. Also, the unarmed Cessna O-2 Skymasters generally performed reconnaissance without hostile elements shooting at them. As soon as the Skyraider, a tactical fighter, attempted this part of the mission, it received ground fire. By the last of November enough Skyraiders came out of the depot with a clean bill of health and the Spads were back to normal missions using fighter bomber tactics.²⁷² The 6th ACS closed 1968 out with 22 Skyraiders on hand: 18 A-1H/J's and 4 A-1Gs. The major problem was the flight restriction due to main wing spar cracks. The depot team worked hard and was commended for its fast pace in returning aircraft to flight status without restrictions. The squadron maintainers continued to provide safe aircraft and operational ready rates were within a decimal point of maintaining an 85 percent average. The abort rate was well below the 7th Air Force limit of 3 percent.²⁷³ The squadron's quarter sortie total including both day and night effort was 1691 sorties in Laos. The figure does not include the 308 sorties flown by the alert Skyraiders in support of Prairie Fire emergencies.²⁷⁴

²⁷⁰ H633SOW, Volume III, January – March 1969, 37.

²⁷¹ H633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 12.

²⁷² H633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 13.

²⁷³ H633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 19.

²⁷⁴ H633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 11.

The squadron operated smoothly even though the mission changed a few times. The big change was that half of the sorties were in-country in support of ground forces and half were interdiction missions in southern Laos. Night interdiction sorties were not as successful as previous attempts. Although bombing accuracy had not suffered, a frequently changing mission affected pilot morale. The biggest morale boost was the return to in-country missions.²⁷⁵

While the Skyraiders struggled under wing restriction problem, maintainers and pilots worked together. Maintenance continued to provide safe and reliable aircraft. Pilots continued to fly, despite the aircraft restrictions. New personnel were incorporated into the squadron and the teamwork continued. The Skyraider team was repeatedly praised for their support of troops in contact with the enemy. Numerous letters of appreciation and commendations were received from troops in contact that had been saved by the Skyraiders of the 6th ACS. The squadron pilots acknowledged that the mission could not have been done without the support of the maintainers.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁵ H633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, Chapter X, no page number.

²⁷⁶ H633SOW, Volume III, January – March 1969, 21.

CHAPTER SIX

MAYDAY! . . . MAYDAY!

Shortly after the 6th ACS arrived in Vietnam, it received a request from the 366th Tactical Fighter Wing (Gunfighters). The Gunfighters wanted Skyraiders to be stationed, and flown from DaNang Air Base, as the F-4 wing understood the Skyraider's "low and slow" capabilities were ideally suited for SAR missions. Skyraiders would provide escort for the DaNang 37th Air Rescue and Recovery Squadron (ARRS) that flew the Sikorsky CH-3C helicopter, commonly referred to as Jolly Green Giant. Assigning Skyraiders at DaNang placed the aircraft closer to the Demilitarized Zone and brought different SAR assets closer together. The Skyraider's long range and slow speed easily matched the helicopters and the two quickly became a superb team.²⁷⁷

After 7th Air Force approval, three 6th ACS Skyraiders went to DaNang Air Base. The team consisted of three pilots, three crew chiefs, and a five-man weapons load team. The ranking pilot became the detachment commander and an NCO was in charge of the enlisted airmen. They were to be supported by the Gunfighter maintenance shops if any problems were found that affected the SAR effort. The plan was to fly two Skyraiders with the third in reserve.²⁷⁸

Recovery of a downed aviator was highly important to all those flying and fighting in Vietnam. Their feelings were supported by higher headquarters and the different American military services. Every effort was made to identify, locate, and recover downed airmen. In November 1967, Brigadier General Allison F. Brooks, commander of Air Force Rescue Service

²⁷⁷ Jensen interview.

²⁷⁸ Reeves interview, 54.

declared “For each rescue airman killed, captured, or missing, we have returned a total of 46.”²⁷⁹ And, it did not matter if that downed airman was Air Force, Navy, Marine, or Army, the job was to rescue him and return him back to his unit, safe and sound.²⁸⁰

The 6th ACS Skyraiders maintained three aircraft on alert. Two Jolly Green Giant helicopters stood alert duty close to the Demilitarized Zone between the two Vietnams. The pre-positioning placed rescue helicopters closer to exit routes most fighters and bombers used after striking North Vietnamese targets. The orbit locations placed the Jolly Greens closer and helped negate the slow speed of the CH-3C helicopter, only 164 miles per hour at maximum speed. Skyraiders often proceeded directly to the last known position of the downed airman.²⁸¹

The 6th ACS set up operations in front of the DaNang aircraft control tower in a large revetment beside the 37th ARRS area. A single revetment was used to protect the three aircraft during the night. During daylight, maintenance moved one aircraft to a backup area. Crew chiefs completed pre-flight inspections on all aircraft for the day’s alert duty. They were allowed to perform the pilot’s checklist including engine start procedures. After engine run, all switches were positioned so the pilot just had to strap in and start the engine. Everything else was done by the crew chief. After the aircraft was “cocked,” pilots were informed and they passed the word to higher headquarters. These procedures helped reduce time between notice of a scramble and aircraft takeoff. The trust that the alert pilots had in the crew chiefs was clearly evident in these time reducing procedures. It was an excellent example of teamwork in action.²⁸²

²⁷⁹ 7th Air Force News, Volume 3, No. 43, *AF Rescuemen Save 309 Lives This Year*. No author, 1 November 1967.

²⁸⁰ Reeves, Ballmes, Dineen, Jensen interviews.

²⁸¹ Reeves, Ballmes, Dineen, Jensen interviews.

²⁸² Ballmes interview.

Alert scramble began when an aircraft was damaged or shot down during a strike mission. The damaged aircraft's pilot or wingman's "Mayday" started the SAR effort. Skyraiders scrambled from DaNang while the two orbiting Jolly Green helicopters headed toward the last known downed airman's position. The pilot of the lead Skyraider became the on-scene commander and directed rescue efforts. Their arrival, transfer of location information, and Skyraider capabilities placed its pilot in charge of the SAR effort, no matter what his rank. His first and most important job was to locate the downed airman. If the aviator's wingman was present, the on-scene commander talked via radio and tried to obtain a fix on the downed man's position. Also, they tried to talk to the downed aviator on an emergency radio. Every aviator, no matter what service, carried a small emergency radio for voice and location purposes. He used the radio and talked to aircraft that, he hoped, were searching for him.²⁸³

Once contacted, Skyraiders flew low trying to pinpoint the downed airman's position. After finding him, Spads called in the rescue helicopter to pick up the downed airman. If the helicopters took ground fire, Skyraiders either used their ordnance or called in other fighters to eliminate threats. After eliminating threats, the helicopter again tried to rescue the downed airman. A successful rescue resulted in increased morale; valuable aviators rescued, and free cold beers. The A-1 SAR detachment did not have to purchase cold beers, especially after a successful rescue. Skyraider pilots wore the squadron and a unique A-1 driver patch on their flight suits. They were easily recognized and appreciated.²⁸⁴

One SAR effort began after a pilot bailed out off the North Vietnamese coast during a late afternoon strike mission in middle July 1968. The DaNang Skyraiders scrambled with

²⁸³ Ballmes interview.

²⁸⁴ Reeves interview, 54.

Majors Reeves and Constantine in the alert aircraft. The downed pilot was reported in the water near a small island called Tiger Island and it was well known because of its large anti-aircraft gun defense network. It was very heavily fortified. Reeves remembered:

Since everything in North Vietnam was heavily fortified, I did not give it much thought and did not have any plans to fly directly over it. However, by the time we got there it was almost dark and as we started our search pattern, I could see what looked like a parachute on the ground. I had my wingman orbit about a half-a-mile out as I went in to take a look. Just as I started flying across the island, all hell broke loose. I had never seen so many guns firing at one plane. There had to be 40 – 50 machine gun nests that zeroed in on me.

Reeves continued: “I was determined to see if the parachute was the real thing so I kept boring through, hoping the gunners would not be too accurate. I was only 1000 feet above the ground and they found me.” Reeves felt anti-aircraft shells striking the aircraft. When he looked over the left wing he observed a string of shells passed right through the wing. Reeves continued:

Right after that I felt a large explosion under my right wing which blew all the ordnance off that side and I got a red warning light that my right gear not locked in the wheel well. Since I was carrying an uneven load on the left wing I had to jettison that ordnance to keep the plane level.

About this time, Major Constantine advised Reeves to “get out of there before the North Vietnamese shot him down.” Reeves reply was:

I knew that but, I had only a short way to go to determine if the parachute was for real. In about one more minute, I could tell the parachute had been staked out in a pond as a decoy so I made a turn away from the island and got out of range of all the guns.

After leaving the island and joining his wingman, Constantine flew up alongside Reeves and advised the right main landing gear was hanging half way down. Reeves tried to get the gear into the down and locked position, but could not. After advising DaNang flight operations of his emergency: one main gear and tail wheel down and no hydraulic pressure for the aircraft brakes, the major decided to land rather than eject.²⁸⁵

²⁸⁵ Reeves interview, 54.

It was dark and Reeves would try to slip the aircraft in while landing hoping to force the damaged gear into the locked position. This slip or “crab” landing might generate enough shock to move the gear into the locked position. Also, Reeves would try to use the tail hook to catch the emergency barricade wire to prevent the aircraft from sliding off to one or the other side of the runway. The crab landing and catching the barricade had to be executed at the same time to force the unlocked gear down. Reeves declared:

I executed the landing perfectly, the gear was pushed into a full down position and the tail hook stopped him right on the spot. I considered it the best landing I have ever made. After checking the aircraft, we found over 200 bullet holes, the underside of the right wing was blackened from the explosion and there were only a few shrapnel holes there, but one of the shells had hit the uplock [up-lock] and broken [broke] it, causing the gear to drop down.²⁸⁶

Duty at DaNang was different from that at the home base at Pleiku. Crew chiefs were allowed much more freedom while off station. There were so few maintainers there that they worked together when possible. The teamwork and camaraderie may have been built out of necessity, but everyone worked to help the other. Weapons load team members helped launch and recover Skyraiders during scrambles. They often stood as fire guards and helped move the aircraft after flights. Crew chiefs helped the weapons load team reload the aircraft. Both worked together at the end of runway when aircraft received a “last chance” inspection and had all weapons safety pins removed. The team work and camaraderie was evident as everyone worked to make the SAR rescue mission successful. No one was left out.²⁸⁷

Hellborn 20 became a major SAR effort and began during the evening of July 25, 1968. Hellborn 20 was a United States Marine Grumman A-6 Intruder. The aircraft carried a two man

²⁸⁶ Reeves interview, 55.

²⁸⁷ Author’s recollection.

crew, Major Curtis Lawson, pilot, and Captain Paul G. Brown, bombardier /navigator. The Intruder was shot down in North Vietnam, about thirty-two miles north of the DMZ. It had been attacking North Vietnamese truck traffic and was heavily damaged by multiple antiaircraft hits.²⁸⁸

The DaNang Skyraider detachment scrambled all three aircraft. The Spads joined and escorted two Jolly Green helicopters north. The Spads and Jolly Greens held off about five to ten miles west of Hellborn 20's position. Two Sandy's (any NKP Skyraider in a SAR effort) worked over the rescue site and when would call in the Spads and SAR helicopters. About this time, one of the two Sandy aircraft took several hits and suspended the rescue. The Spads and Jolly Greens were told to "go home and have lunch."²⁸⁹

The Spads, helicopters, and Sandy Skyraiders returned to DaNang. Sandy lead, Major Hale's aircraft, had significant damage so he climbed into his wingman's A-1E and flew back to NKP for another Skyraider. After lunch the Spads returned to the rescue site. During the day, North American F-100 Misty fast FACS directed approximately two strikes every five minutes against enemy gun emplacements. Arriving into the rescue area, the Spads and Jolly Greens were advised to orbit because two Sandys were again working the site. When the Sandys expended their ordnance, the Spads replaced them and took over the rescue effort.²⁹⁰

The downed Marine had landed near an east-west running river. In spite of over 120 air strikes that day the North Vietnamese were still shooting at everything in the air. The Spad team

²⁸⁸ Dineen interview. (Major Dineen was part of the SAR effort on Hellborn 20. He was also involved in reconstruction of the rescue effort at an Air Rescue Society briefing on the SAR effort. Numerous letters were provided by Major Dineen including those from Curtis Lawson, Alan (Ed) Hale, Misty FACS Ron Furtak, Bud Bacon, Dave Jenny, and Dick Rutan.)

²⁸⁹ Dineen interview.

²⁹⁰ Dineen interview.

expended all their ordnance and was relieved by two Sandy aircraft. Within ten minutes of the Spads' departure, the Sandys called in the two Jolly Green helicopters and recovered the downed pilot. When the Spad pilots met the SAR helicopter, the Marine pilot looked like a wrinkled prune—he had spent almost 24 hours in the water. Major Dineen added, “But he was a very happy prune!” During the Hellborn 20 SAR effort, 38 F-4s, 11 F-105s, five A-6s, two A-4s, and seven A-7s were involved, for a total of 63 support aircraft. Additionally, 4 Misty FACS were used and an estimated 14 primary SAR aircraft to make a grand total of 81 aircraft. The effort lasted 10 hours and a total of 118 tons of ordnance. Regrettably, Marine Captain Paul G. Brown was captured and held as a POW. He was released on March 14, 1973.²⁹¹

Major Dineen recalled another SAR mission near A Shau Valley in August 1968. Downed aviators were on the ground in the bottom of a rocky valley. Although he could not recall the downed pilot's call sign, while attending a SAR Society meeting, he met an Army helicopter pilot who recalled the mission. The Army pilot explained while approaching the rescue site, he observed North Vietnamese antiaircraft gunners lined up along one side of the valley's ridge line. The gunners had left their 37-millimeter guns and watched the Skyraiders fly below their position down in the valley. Luckily, positioning of the emplacements did not allow the gunners to depress the gun barrels down enough to take the SAR team under direct antiaircraft fire. Also, had the Skyraiders flown up and out of the valley, they would have been easy targets for the North Vietnamese gun crews. Major Dineen stated, “I never was aware of the North Vietnamese antiaircraft gun positions above and had decided to stay in the valley rather than climb up and out.”²⁹²

²⁹¹ Dineen interview and PH633SOW, Volume I, July – September 1968, 22.

²⁹² Dineen interview.

During one of the early assignments at DaNang, around August 1968, maintainers suggested the Skyraider be armed with three SUU-11/A mini-gun pods instead of one normally carried on the left wing pylon. The weapons load team was behind the suggestion, as pilots often stated they could use the pods' capabilities to suppress enemy fire. The plan was to mount three mini-gun pods on one small triple ejector rack. The three pods fit without problems, but the whole assembly, when installed on the wing pylon, did not clear the outboard landing gear door. When asked if the doors could be removed, the answer was a definite "No!" It never mattered to the maintainers that the Air Force had not tested or approved of the proposed field modification. They worked as part of the team and tried to provide an answer to a team member's request.²⁹³

Another SAR effort occurred off Tiger Island in the middle of October 1968. The Skyraiders scrambled, headed north, and were advised that a rescue helicopter was shot down. It took the Skyraiders about 45 minutes to arrive at the scene. A small Navy plane orbited the area and was glad to hand off to the Skyraiders since that was their job. Besides the Navy aircraft had received heavy fire from the island's guns and did not have anything with which to fight back.²⁹⁴ The Skyraiders were told that beside the helicopter crew (pilot, co-pilot flight engineer, and PJ), there were also two pilots from a McDonnell F-4C Phantom who were being picked up when the helicopter had been hit by enemy fire. Reeves recalled "I learned later that the pilots fell back into the water and the helicopter landed on them."²⁹⁵ Now, there were six downed airmen close to shore. It would be another 50 minutes before two other SAR helicopters arrived.²⁹⁶

²⁹³ Author's recollection.

²⁹⁴ H633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 8.

²⁹⁵ H633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, Letter of Appreciation from Donald R. D'Amico, Lt. Col, USAF, F-4 pilot rescued, Number 4.

²⁹⁶ Reeves, interview, 55.

The Skyraiders flew over the floating helicopter. During the flyover, two life rafts were observed. They had separated, and did not move closer to the island, but were within machine gun range and the new rescue helicopter would be vulnerable when they picked up the crews. The Skyraiders made a pass at the gun positions to see what response they could get. Reeves recalled that he could see several areas where guns were blinking, an indication of gunfire, but none used tracers. After several passes, the Skyraiders pulled out of gun range, but remained where they could quickly respond if the North Vietnamese started shooting at the rafts. During this orbit, Reeves observed a mortar round destroy the floating helicopter. He knew from past experience that the gunners were accurate and this would be a challenging rescue.²⁹⁷

The Skyraiders' arsenal included white phosphorous smoke rockets so they could lay down a smoke screen, but one thing made it difficult. The wind was blowing 20 to 30 miles per hour and any smoke would be quickly dissipated. Reeves requested through the Airborne Command and Control (ACC) aircraft additional fighters to help suppress the anti-aircraft gun positions. The ACC aircraft, a specially modified Lockheed C-130 Hercules, had already lined up 26 other strike aircraft, 13 pairs, with all kinds of ordnance, to help during the rescue. Reeves first directed some to work on the big guns and the rest to stand by until the Spads marked machine gun and mortar positions so they could be eliminated. The Skyraiders fired white phosphorous smoke rockets where they wanted the fighters to place their bombs, but the wind was blowing so hard the smoke almost immediately disappeared. The attacking aircraft could not "hit my smoke" as it blew away too quickly.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁷ Reeves interview, 55.

²⁹⁸ Reeves interview, 55.

When the rockets did not work, Reeves changed the plan. He requested the fighters to watch him as he descended to about 100 feet over the guns and where he turned away; they place their bombs on that turn point. However, Reeves had to repeat the low passes ten more times. The North Vietnamese gunners still did not use tracers. There were too many aircraft striking the gun sites and tracers helped pinpoint their location. Reeves and his wingman, Dave Henson, were the only ones the enemy opened fire on during their low altitude passes.²⁹⁹

The helicopters were approaching the area so Reeves and Henson selected CBU-22 to establish a smoke screen. The CBU-22 dispensed smoke bomblets and each Skyraider carried six sets of the weapons.³⁰⁰ Both pilots set their armament panels to discharge individual smoke bomblets one tube at a time until the six tubes were empty. Delivery had to be accurate or the smoke cloud would not form correctly and the wind could disperse the screen. The time the smoke screen would exist was estimated to be approximately 20–30 seconds. The helicopters reported they were heading in to pick up the downed airmen under protection of the smoke screen. Fighters attacked the anti-aircraft gun sites and helped ensure the helicopter could pick up the men in the water. Turning back after laying the smoke screen, Reeves saw the smoke break apart from the wind. As he watched his wingman turn off the target, the rescue helicopter notified everyone that it had picked up all the downed airmen and was returning to DaNang.

Reeves declared, “It was as good a mission as could be preformed.”³⁰¹ A few of the other aircraft had suffered some battle damage, but all were able to return to their own bases without problems. The pilot of the F-4, Don D’Amico, had been hurt when the helicopter fell on him,

²⁹⁹ H633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 8.

³⁰⁰ Reeves interview, 56.

³⁰¹ H633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 9.

but later returned to duty. Reeves continued “A very nice Sunday and the sun was still shining bright and for a while all was right with our world.”³⁰²

Living conditions at DaNang were primitive. Enlisted airmen lived in a ten-man tent. When it rained, everything got wet. But the living situation soon changed. After a rescue one Skyraider reported a radio discrepancy. The Gunfighter wing had promised that its maintenance section would provide support, so it was informed of the discrepancy and asked for a specialist to come to the Skyraider area. Their maintenance control responded they would, but he never showed up, even after repeated calls. The discrepancy prevented the Skyraider from being used and reduced the effective aircraft by a third. The detachment commander called Gunfighter maintenance control and was ignored. Someone decided not to support the Spad unit. The pilot called Pleiku and informed the squadron of the problem. Completely fed up with the lack of support, the pilot asked for and, was granted the option to return to Pleiku.³⁰³

The Skyraiders were flight ready and even the aircraft with the radio discrepancy could be flown. The enlisted airmen were told to go to catch the next inter-base aircraft. Word reached the 37th ARRS commander, he talked to the detachment commander and promised things would immediately change if the Skyraiders stayed. His maintainers arrived and repaired the radio. Next, the enlisted airmen moved into a building where the 37th's flight engineers and PJs had previously lived. The building had air conditioning and was close to the Skyraider parking area. Last, he promised to provide any assistance to ensure the detachment could do its job. With this support, the detachment commander agreed to stay.³⁰⁴

³⁰² Reeves interview, 56.

³⁰³ Author's recollection.

³⁰⁴ Author's recollection.

Steaks were appreciated and there never was enough served in the dining halls or clubs at DaNang. Obtaining steaks for small unit parties was difficult. For the enlisted maintainers, steaks appeared to be out of reach: they did not know anyone who could provide them while at DaNang. But some believe that fate smiles on the believer. During a night trip to the showers, fate smiled on the Spad maintainers. They had worked late and needed to clean up, so they drove to the showers. During the drive in a heavy downpour; suddenly someone darted in front of the truck and dropped a large box. The driver stopped and one of the maintainers went to move the box. He returned and explained: "Let's have a party!"³⁰⁵

The box contains almost 100-pounds of steak. The person who ran in front of the truck had broken into a dining hall refrigerated freezer. He dropped one of two boxes he was carrying. The maintainers knew that the steaks would not last long in the heat and asked the pilots to have a cookout. The pilots agreed to provide everything else if the maintainers got the steaks. Sweet! Within a few days the party took place and steaks were cooked over a modified 55 gallon grill. The cookout was a success and the detachment invited the men of the 37th ARRS. Not being able to keep a secret from the Skyraider pilots the steak story was told and all had a good laugh.³⁰⁶

Search and Rescue was the most dangerous mission in Vietnam conflict. SAR pilots did everything in their power to locate a downed airman, no matter what the enemy's response. The enemy in Vietnam liked to surround a downed aviator because they knew the Americans would try to rescue them, so SAR operations were not without losses. On July 2, 1968, Major Henry A. Tipping and Captain "Stretch" Ballmes were flying a SAR mission for a downed F-105 Thunderchief fighter bomber pilot in the DMZ. Major Tipping was designated Spad 11.

³⁰⁵ Author's recollection.

³⁰⁶ Author's recollection.

Attempting to pinpoint the survivor location, Spad 11 made a low pass and received heavy enemy automatic weapons fire. Tipping pulled off and headed toward a safe area. Ballmes tried to talk to Spad 11, but received no response. The stricken aircraft trailed heavy black smoke and crashed a short distance from the target area without the canopy leaving the aircraft.³⁰⁷ The heavy enemy activity precluded a rescue attempt and Major Tipping was listed as Missing in Action. When the news was announced, it was greeted with sadness. Major Tipping was well liked by the maintainers. He always sat on the wing of his aircraft filling out the necessary forms while the Skyraider was pushed back into the revetment. He also, in a quiet voice, described the mission he had just completed. His loss was felt by everyone in the squadron.³⁰⁸



Chase View.³⁰⁹

On October 4, 1968, the DaNang SAR force scrambled to provide close air support to a Special Forces SOG team that had declared a Prairie Fire emergency. They were surrounded on

³⁰⁷ Ballmes interview.

³⁰⁸ PH633SOW, Volume I, July – September 1968, 22.

³⁰⁹ ARH, *Chase View*.

three sides and the ground fire was heavy. A Kingbee H-34 helicopter attempted to pick up the team, but was damaged by ground fire. It landed one half mile away and was abandoned. A Jolly Green tried for a pickup, but was hit badly, and had to recover at DaNang. Eight Spad flights had been diverted from other missions to help suppress the ground fire. The terrain in the area was mountainous and the Spads could only attack from two directions. Smoke from napalm and white phosphorous rockets along with rapidly deteriorating weather obscuring the landing zone, made all passes difficult. F-4 Phantoms tried to drop hi-drag MK 82 bombs, but they had to pull off dry on many passes due to their inability to acquire the target through the smoke and low hanging clouds. A second Jolly Green moved in and attempted to extract the ground team. But, it was hit by ground fire and crashed in flames. It was a morbid scene and those circling the area were sick at heart to think they had not suppressed all the weapons in the area.³¹⁰

Major Dineen, as on-scene commander, directed the Spads and fast movers in a coordinated and concentrated fire suppression effort around the friendly force. Not until darkness approached and weather conditions deteriorated to the point of making the pickup almost impossible did Dineen allow another Jolly Green to attempt the pickup. As the Jolly Green approached the pickup point, Dineen had all Spads in trail formation in a 6,000 feet orbit. The Spads headed down as the Jolly Green began to hover over the SOG team. As the Spads approached where the Jolly Green was hovering, a Spad rolled off on either side of the helicopter and strafed to suppress any hostile ground fire. The tactics worked and the pickup was successful. Not only was the surviving SOG team rescued, but also two survivors of the Jolly Green that had been shot down earlier.³¹¹

³¹⁰ H633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 7.

³¹¹ H633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 8.

DaNang was a huge air base. Besides the 366th Tactical Fighter Wing and the 37th ARRS, it hosted two South Vietnamese Air Force squadrons, one O-1 Birddog and the other Skyraiders. DaNang was always busy and during the night, maintainers often could see AC-47 gunship tracers as they fired down on enemy positions, especially around a promontory known as “Monkey Mountain.” The tracers appeared as a slow-moving ribbon of fire weaving from the aircraft to the ground. After watching a gunship work during at night it was easy to understand the term “Puff, The Magic Dragon.”³¹²

Once, detachment pilots informed the maintainers that a South Vietnamese O-1 was heading back to the base. The Birddog’s pilot had been shot while calling in air strikes and the aircraft was being flown from the back seat by the observer. The observer notified the tower of the circumstances and declared: “He was going land the damaged aircraft.” As the aircraft wobbled through the air, the Birddog suddenly nosed over and crashed in front of the Skyraider area. The little aircraft did not burn, and both crew members were quickly removed.

Later, a recovery crane picked up the severely damaged Cessna and placed it on a flatbed trailer. The Birddog was taken to the South Vietnamese area. The little aircraft had been ripped in two when the wing separated from the fuselage. When the detachment maintainers went over to inspect the damaged aircraft, most were taken aback by blood that was everywhere in the small cockpit. Clearly visible in the blood-stained cockpit were a gold crucifix and chain. Most likely, it had been a good luck charm. It was not known whether the airmen survived.³¹³

One of the most satisfying SAR efforts occurred on October 27, 1968, when the Spads were able to recover one of their own. Lieutenant Colonel Victor J. Cole, was striking an enemy

³¹² Author’s recollection.

³¹³ Author’s recollection.

storage area deep in southern Laos when hit by 37-millimeter antiaircraft gun fire. His left wing was blown off and Cole ejected at approximately 500 feet. The wingman did not see Cole eject and assumed the pilot did not get out and went in with the aircraft. A pall of gloom hung heavy over the Spad squadron, a comrade had gone down: this was too close to home.³¹⁴

It took almost an hour for Cole to get a message out on his survival radio. That single transmission was all that was needed to set a SAR effort into action. Majors Frank Snedden and Harold Pierce, were the first on-scene. Having no idea where Cole landed and not able to locate Cole's parachute in the triple canopy jungle, they made extremely low passes in an attempt to locate the survivor with their UHF directional finding equipment. This had to be accomplished prior to any attempt to suppress ground fire. Several of the low passes had to be aborted due to intense ground fire received from the 37-millimeter antiaircraft gun that had shot down Cole.³¹⁵

Major Snedden, with the help of a Covey FAC, located Cole's parachute. Vietnam era military parachutes were multi-colored, with white, green and orange panels. The high-visibility colors aided aircraft to find a downed aviator. Knowing where a downed airman was made it possible to silence any ground fire. A total of ten fast movers, F-4s and F-100s, were diverted for ground fire suppression. There were ten Spad flights expended their ordnance on gun positions or were held high to be used as air cover for the final pickup attempt.³¹⁶

Later, Major William P. Farnham, Spad 11, the on-scene commander, made several low passes in the area to determine if there might still be some ground fire. Not getting any fire on three passes, he declared the area safe and the Jolly Green helicopters moved in. Spad 11 and 12

³¹⁴ H633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 9.

³¹⁵ H633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 9.

³¹⁶ H633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 10.

laid down a smoke screen with their CBU-22s to cover the hazardous operation. All Spad aircraft rolled in and strafed the area surrounding the hovering Jolly Green to suppress any enemy ground fire or troop movement. The recovery of Colonel Cole was successful. After the rescue and celebrations at Pleiku, Cole was asked what he did while waiting for rescue. He responded “I sat down and finished three crossword puzzles that I had placed in my flight suit pocket prior to the flight.”³¹⁷ Major Dineen recalled the rescue with a smile stating “Cole had stolen my newspaper that I used to complete the puzzles while waiting for a mission.”³¹⁸

The relationship between the Jolly Green unit and the Skyraider detachment quietly grew as each appreciated what the other was doing. The teamwork and comradeship between the two vastly different units was easily observed. The 37th had a large white sign on its revetments. A green giant was depicted standing, holding his arms across his torso and smiling at all who passed. The sign showed the number of satisfied customers: those rescued. On one dark night, three-foot long green footprints suddenly appeared all over DaNang Air Base. They were easy to see because they had been made with florescent paint. It was easy to follow the prints around the base. They went to the dining hall, officers club, and headquarters building. They went to the flight line and “walked” everywhere, sometimes standing on aircraft. When the prints came to the 6th ACS Skyraiders, they came to attention in front of the aircraft. The how and who was never discovered, but those who observed the footprints smile when they recall the trick.³¹⁹

Another example of the comradeship between the two units was the offering of flights on Jolly Green helicopters. Maintainers were offered a ride. The flights were not extra flights, but

³¹⁷ H633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 10.

³¹⁸ Dineen interview.

³¹⁹ Author’s recollection.

combat flights. One flight a maintainer was invited, but declined; there was something to do on his aircraft. Maybe next time and the helicopter went on its way. Later, it developed an engine problem and returned to DaNang. The problem, a bad oil pressure gauge was repaired. Again, the maintainer was asked to go, but his aircraft was still not to his satisfaction.³²⁰

The maintainer watched the helicopter lifted off, climb to around two hundred feet, and began transition into forward flight. Suddenly, the helicopter began to spiral out of control and quickly lost altitude. The aircraft crashed, driving the right landing gear through the sponson. The main rotor was still running just above the ground and the crew quickly shut down the engines. The fire department arrived and hosed down the aircraft and area. Nobody was injured and all walked away. The 45-degree flex coupling had failed and without it the aircraft had spun out of control. The coupling provided power to drive the tail rotor and keep the helicopter flying straight, much like a rudder. That maintainer had just missed being on board the aircraft, and refused to fly on a helicopter for over twenty years.³²¹

In the last three months of 1968, the 6th ACS SAR detachment flew in 13 major SAR efforts. These 13 rescue attempts required 32 sorties and almost 85 hours in the air. Squadron pilots continued to be rotated on a weekly basis, thus ensuring that all Spad pilots were SAR qualified. The successful rescue of the downed Jolly Green helicopter crews and of Lieutenant Colonel Cole were rewarding incidents. They again displayed the teamwork approach that the squadron lived by. “The importance of teamwork” were not just words, but the way of life for the squadron’s members. For all of them there was a definite sense of personal satisfaction.³²²

³²⁰ Author’s recollection.

³²¹ Author’s recollection.

³²² H633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 6.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHALLENGES

The end of 1968 and most of 1969 brought many challenges to the 6th Special Operations Squadron. Maintainers and pilots worked to ensure teamwork, camaraderie, and professionalism continued. Squadron members concentrated on their jobs and accomplished much during trying times. Sometimes they had to fight their own system as maintainers and pilots predicted future problems with rotation back to the United States after they completed the one-year tour. It appeared no one realized that the squadron had arrived together and would leave at the same time. Additionally, persistent rumors were heard about the Skyraider and the 6th SOS.³²³

The year 1968 ended with two aircraft incidents at Pleiku Air Base. Maintainers, returning after lunch, found a C-47 in a ditch behind the maintenance areas. The Skytrain had considerable damage. It had just missed a tow truck and its airman driver. Later, it was reported the C-47 had tried to take off with its rudder “lock” in place. The lock prevented the rudder from moving in the wind. The red safety device had been left in place so when there was enough airspeed, the rudder took over and directed the aircraft toward the left. One of the aircrew rushed out and quickly removed the lock immediately after the crash.³²⁴

The second incident involved a North American F-100 fighter bomber that was damaged. Maintainers watched the unfolding drama from the aircraft revetments. The base fire department and HH-43 Pedro helicopter were positioned on the taxiway as the F-100 headed toward the runway. Almost everyone thought the jet was moving too fast and watched with renewed interest. The F-100 landed safely and deployed its braking parachute (drag chute), but it did not open correctly. The jet lowered its arresting hook to catch the barrier cable stretched across the

³²³ H633SOW, Volume III, January–March 1969, 46.

³²⁴ Beam interview and author’s recollection.

mid point of Pleiku's runway. The hook missed the cable and the pilot tried to stop the fast moving fighter by braking. The high speed quickly used up the brakes, as evidenced by a large puff of smoke from the main wheels. Nothing remained to slow the fighter as it continued down the runway. The aircraft flew off the overrun and crashed into a field. Emergency personnel arrived and the pilot was taken to the base hospital. Later, the F-100 was removed for repairs. Surprisingly, the aircraft received minor damage from the crash. Everyone who watched felt more appreciative of his own actions when working on the Skyraiders. Nobody wanted his aircraft to experience the same thing somewhere else.³²⁵

The 6th SOS lost a majority of its trained and qualified personnel in the first quarter of 1969. However, the trend was reversed with the input of twenty nine new maintainers in mid February. Additional manning assistance was provided by twenty eight weapons load specialists sent from three different bases to perform loading as new personnel were trained and certified. The lack of Skyraider familiarity in the influx of personnel created a large training program. The problem was resolved through a concentrated on-the-job training (OJT) program; all personnel in training were being closely monitored during their Career Development Courses and practical phases.³²⁶ On the pilot side, some of the original squadron pilots were scheduled to depart soon. One of these was Captain O. E. "Stretch" Ballmes. He departed after notification that his wife was very sick and he was requested to return home in early January 1969.³²⁷ While the numbers may seem impressive, they do not reflect experience levels of those in the squadron.³²⁸

³²⁵ Beam interview and H633SOW, Volume III, January–March 1969, 48.

³²⁶ H633SOW, Volume III, January–March 1969, 24–26.

³²⁷ Ballmes interview.

³²⁸ H633SOW, Volume III, January–March 1969, 4.

1969 6 th SOS MANNING (1 st QUARTER)						
MONTH/DAY	OFFICERS		AIRMEN		TOTAL	
	Auth'd	Assgn'd	Auth'd	Assgn'd	Auth'd	Assgn'd
JAN 15	32	32	112	129	144	161
JAN 31	32	28	112	112	144	140
FEB 15	32	27	112	123	144	150
FEB 28	32	23	112	65	144	91
MAR 15	32	28	112	92	144	120
MAR 31	32	26	112	130	144	156

As the squadron adapted to its manning issues, it continued to prosecute the war. On January 10, 1969, one of the first SAR missions of the New Year occurred. The mission was both satisfying and heartbreaking. The satisfying part was the recovery of Spad pilot Major James B. Wheeler. The heartbreak was the loss of Major Arthur R. Sprott during the Wheeler rescue. Majors Wheeler and Jack Gaffney had scrambled answering a Prairie Fire emergency call. After the Spads forced the enemy to retire, Wheeler discovered that his Skyraider received more serious damage from enemy ground fire than he had first believed. Wheeler stated:

I lost oil very fast and headed toward DaNang to, hopefully, land. I wanted to get as close as possible to friendly territory before I ejected and planned to stay in the Skyraider until the propeller stopped. While in route, the engine seized. With no other options, I ejected while over enemy held territory about 20 miles southeast of DaNang.³²⁹

Major Wheeler was rescued and voiced great displeasure at having to be on the ground surrounded by snakes.³³⁰ While the Wheeler rescue was occurring, the SAR alert aircraft at DaNang scrambled to provide cover for the 37th ARRS Jolly Green Giant helicopters. During

³²⁹ H633SOW, Volume III, January–March 1969, 14.

³³⁰ Ballmes interview.

the rescue coverage, flight lead lost both visual and voice contact with Major Sprott in Spad 12. Spad 11 believed that Major Sprott was shot down by enemy ground fire, but none of the rescue team observed the wreckage of Major Sprott's aircraft, but the exact cause of the incident, and death of the pilot could not be determined.³³¹

JAN–MAR 1969 SORTIES FLOWN ³³²				
SORTIES	JAN	FEB	MAR	TOTAL
COMBAT	772	489	562	1,823
TOTAL	755	459	477	1,691
HOURS	1,530	955	1,049	3,539
ACFT IN PHASE	1.5	2.1	2.5	6
ACFT IN DEPOT	3	3	3	9

On January 13, 1969, Skyraiders responded to a Prairie Fire emergency call during the night. Major Win E. DePorter flew as Spad 36 to support a SOG team defending their beleaguered position. The unit history stated: “Due to mountainous terrain, darkness and hostile fire, the Spads had a difficult time locating and suppressing hostile ground fire.” Spad 36 made numerous passes over the friendly forces in order to locate their position and where the hostile ground forces were.³³³

On several occasions, Spad 36 made low flyovers above the friendly forces with his landing lights on so that the SOG team could correct his passes. The amount of ground fire was exceptionally high as evidenced by the loss of a Martin B-57 Canberra bomber and its two pilots while supporting this mission. Spad 36's accuracy in repeated passes on the enemy positions

³³¹ H633SOW, Volume III, January–March 1969, 14.

³³² H633SOW, Volume III, January–March 1969, 6.

³³³ H633SOW, Volume III, January–March 1969, 10.

was highly significant in reducing the overwhelming pressure of the hostile force. Being in contact with the SOG team, Major DePorter continually urged “hold on!” The repeated delivery of ordnance kept up the team’s morale and confidence throughout the night.³³⁴

DePorter had to return to Pleiku and refuel and rearm, returning as Spad 42. Upon arrival back at the scene, he made contact with the SOG team; the morale and confidence of the ground team were perceptibly raised by the knowledge that he was back. As weather became too bad, DePorter planned his flight’s fuel and ordnance delivery to stay the greatest time while producing maximum results. He logged over seven hour’s flight time that night and as a result of his leadership, ceaseless effort, and outstanding ability as a pilot, pressure was relieved on the SOG team and they were extracted at daybreak with only two men wounded.³³⁵

Pleiku Air Base came under seven enemy rocket attacks during the first quarter of 1969. A January 15 attack began at approximately 1930 hours with eighteen 122-millimeter rockets striking the base. Especially hard hit was the Petroleum, Oil and Lubricant (POL) supply section when a rocket hit the fuel storage area and destroyed 92,000 gallons of JP-4 fuel. Two aircraft received minor damage, and twenty-seven personnel were wounded. The base came under attack twice on February 23, 1969. In the first early morning attack enemy mortar rounds impacted outside the base. Counter–mortar fire was not used due to the proximity of friendly forces in the detected area. Next, less than three hours later at 0600, the base again came under attack by 122-millimeter rockets. Two rockets struck the base causing minor damage.³³⁶

At approximately 0630, February 25, 1969, Pleiku was again targeted with the big enemy 122-millimeter rockets. Two landed on the base causing minor damage. On March 21, 1969, the

³³⁴ H633SOW, Volume III, January–March 1969, 10 - 11.

³³⁵ H633SOW, Volume III, January–March 1969, 11.

³³⁶ H633SOW, Volume III, January–March 1969, 29, 31.

enemy launched two daylight attacks. One rocket struck the Bachelor Officer Quarters, causing four casualties and heavy damage to the building. Later in the day, another rocket attack occurred. Never before had the enemy ventured out so late in the day. Two rockets impacted on the base, again causing minor damage. Five individuals received non-life threatening wounds.³³⁷ Sergeant McAskill recalled these attacks: “When the base sirens went off everyone headed toward the bunker for shelter. But, once inside you could feel the fear of some of those there. This added to the normal stink in the shelters and made you feel uncomfortable.”³³⁸

On 17–19 January 1969, another DaNang SAR scramble, Major William Farnham and Captain William Thompson provided assistance in an ongoing rescue of Stormy 02B, Captain Victor A. Smith. Stormy 02 was an F-4 Phantom and went down in an area with a very heavy concentration of enemy forces. The pilot, Stormy 02A, was never heard from. Shortly after the Spad team arrived on scene, Sandy 02 was shot down. Farnham located the downed Sandy pilot, immediately established communications, and started to orbit the area to provide cover. He quickly was targeted by intense and accurate antiaircraft fire. After a flight of Republic F-105 Thunderchief fighter-bombers expended their ordnance, the Spads continued to suppress the ground fire with repeated low level attacks. After three hours, ordnance exhausted, and low on fuel, they left the SAR effort handing control to replacement Sandy Skyraiders.³³⁹

This SAR effort was terminated shortly thereafter due to darkness. At first light the following day, the rescue effort resumed and a second Skyraider Sandy 10, was promptly shot down. Major Farnham and Captain Thompson reentered the battle and repeatedly attacked the

³³⁷ H633SOW, Volume III, January–March 1969, 34.

³³⁸ McAskill interview and History of the 633rd Special Operations Wing, Volume III, January–March 1969, 34.

³³⁹ H633SOW, Volume III, January – March 1969, 14–15.

deadly opposition until their ordnance was expended and low fuel forced their return to base again. Other Spad pilots participated in this SAR effort and included Lieutenant Colonel Alexander E. Corey, Majors James B. Wheeler and David E. Hinsen, and Lieutenant Frederick W. Butler. The final rescue effort tally was five aircraft lost (including Stormy 02) and eight airmen rescued. The five aircraft lost included three A-1s, one HH-3, and one F-4C. What really counted was the successful number of rescued airmen.³⁴⁰

Often ridiculed by the faster jet-powered aircraft, the Skyraider proved itself over and over. The aircraft may have been slow by modern standards, but this translated into “lower, slower, and closer.” On February 28, 1969, Spad 03, Captain Rufus D. Harris and his wingman provided close air support for the infiltration and resupply of three SOG teams in southern Laos. That mission completed, the Spads diverted to a Prairie Fire call one hundred miles to the north. As the Skyraiders arrived, the FAC was firing marking rockets in a vain attempt to hold the enemy at bay. The team was surrounded and in close contact with the enemy.³⁴¹

The situation was so grave that the ground commander marked his position with smoke and cleared the Skyraiders to strike 360 degrees around his team. The Spads made two low level passes through heavy small arms and automatic weapons fire to insure that their hot attacks would be accurate and a safe distance from the team. In the next twenty-five minutes the Spads made twenty-four napalm, CBU, and strafing passes at extremely low level, ignoring heavy ground fire to focus their attacks on the team’s vulnerable flanks. No other tactical air power was available. The Spads worked until their fuel state forced a minimum fuel recovery on the narrow aluminum planked runway at Quang Tri, Republic of Vietnam. As the Skyraiders

³⁴⁰ H633SOW, Volume III, January–March 1969, 15.

³⁴¹ H633SOW, Volume III, January–March 1969, 11 – 12.

departed the area, the ground team commander reported that as the results of the attacks by the Spads, the enemy had broken contact. The accuracy that the Spads brought to bear on a vastly larger enemy force saved the team from annihilation.³⁴²

Army Sergeant Francis Thompson served in the 135th Assault Helicopter Company as an avionics maintainer during 1968. He recalled many times Skyraiders had been called in to aid friendly forces in enemy contact, especially near the Cambodian border. “The aircraft were great and very accurate with their delivery of bombs. They were just fantastic.” A call for assistance resulted in arrival of a FAC and usually two to four Skyraiders. The Skyraiders came in low and placed their ordnance where it was needed. They helped save many American and South Vietnamese soldiers. Even after forty years, Thompson remembers the Skyraider and the role it played in the ground war in Southeast Asia.³⁴³

One of the few breakdowns of squadron teamwork resulted when a young lieutenant maintenance officer was assigned to the 6th ACS. He transferred from another squadron and one of his requirements was to stretch the auxiliary power cords out to their full length, versus only using what was needed. The lieutenant failed to recognize a safety problem. The only way to stretch the cords was to place a generator in one revetment and stretch the cord across to the facing Skyraider. All well and fine until a Skyraider had to taxi across the cord. No matter how the maintainers argued against the practice it remained in effect. Besides being dangerous, the practice did not make any sense other than follow a dumb instruction. The Navy power unit just did not fit into the way the USAF used its ground equipment.³⁴⁴

³⁴² H633SOW, Volume III, January–March 1969, 11 – 12.

³⁴³ Francis Thompson, Sergeant First Class, United States Army, Avionics Technician. Interviewed by author March 13, 2010, Goldsboro, NC. (Hereinafter referred to as Thompson interview.)

³⁴⁴ Author’s recollection.

When an F-4 Phantom, call sign Pintail 01, was shot down near A Chau Valley, Lieutenant Colonel Corey and Major Farnham scrambled out of Pleiku Air Base to assist the SAR effort. The rescue was in its second day and the area was saturated with 37-, 57-millimeter and other antiaircraft weapons. Numerous jet aircraft had been sent in the effort to reduce the volume of enemy fire. The on-scene-commander, Sandy 01, was shot down and killed. At this point the whole SAR effort appeared doomed to failure. Bringing in a Jolly Green would have been tantamount to suicide. The only weapon that might turn the tide in favor for the SAR effort was CBU-19. It was a tear gas weapon and had been rarely used during SAR efforts.³⁴⁵

Delivery of CBU-19 required a long, straight, slow, and low altitude attack. Under the most permissive environments, a mile long run at 300-feet above the terrain and 220 knot airspeed was hazardous. In combat, the sum of risks was considered incalculable. Lieutenant Colonel Corey and Major Farnhan, now dangerously low on fuel, positioned for the attack. The mountainous terrain, slow speed, and low altitude dictated a near suicidal course over known 37-millimeter gun positions. Leveling off at low altitude and pressing through a hail of antiaircraft fire, the Spads expended their ordnance right on target. The guns were silenced and the Jolly Green was able to rescue the downed pilot without ground fire. Another fighter pilot snatched away from a determined enemy—rescued from captivity or death.³⁴⁶

CBU-19 was used again in another SAR effort on March 10, 1969. Lieutenant Colonel Harold D. Hadder, Spad 10, and Captain Thompson, Spad 11, scrambled from DaNang for a SAR effort for PaPaya 02, a F-4 fighter-bomber. Sandy 03 requested Spad 11 to descend with him to look the area over and locate the downed aviator. The other Skyraiders remained out of

³⁴⁵ H633SOW, Volume III, January–March 1969, 16.

³⁴⁶ H633SOW, Volume III, January–March 1969, 16.

range with the Jolly Green helicopters. When the entry and departure routes were established, the Hobos were cleared in to lay down CBU-19.³⁴⁷

As a Jolly Green started toward the survivor, the helicopter began to receive ground fire. The Spads and Sandys immediately began laying down their ordnance to effectively suppress the ground fire. Spad 11 was hit on his third pass, but remained with the helicopter. The passes continued and the Jolly Green was able to make the pickup covered by the Spads and Sandys. Although only one crew member was rescued, this rescue was an outstanding example of teamwork between the different units involved, the Jolly Greens, Sandys, and Spads.³⁴⁸

On March 18, 1969, Major James F. Egbert, and his wingman scrambled to answer a Prairie Fire emergency. The Skyraiders arrived at 0730 and were informed that the SOG team had been under heavy pressure all night. The Spads began suppressing ground fire around the team. As the FAC marked targets, the Skyraiders dropped one napalm tank per run as requested. The ground team reported that the Spads were taking heavy small arms and automatic weapons fire on every pass. Due to the close proximity of friendly forces, it was necessary for the Spads to go in low and on a restricted heading. On Spad 01's fourth pass it became evident that the Skyraider had been hit. Its controls were stiff and a distinct smell of hydraulic fluid entered the cockpit. The aircraft's hydraulic pressure dropped to zero pressure and a visual check by Spad 02 confirmed that hydraulic fluid was streaming from the left main landing gear well area.³⁴⁹

The Spads elected to continue the attack as they still had napalm and CBUs remaining. They completed two more passes and expelled their ordnance on the enemy. As the Spads left

³⁴⁷ H633SOW, Volume III, January–March 1969, 17.

³⁴⁸ H633SOW, Volume III, January–March 1969, 17.

³⁴⁹ H633SOW, Volume III, January–March 1969, 12.

the area, the ground commander thanked them and said they had considerably reduced the pressure on the SOG team. Spad 01 used the emergency gear extension system and made an emergency no-flap landing at Pleiku. Spad 01 had been hit in the left wing. The shell knocked out the hydraulic system and narrowly missed the cockpit as the round exited through the top of the wing. During the post-flight inspection maintenance discovered the aircraft had been hit in the right flap and that the shell had narrowly missed the centerline auxiliary fuel tank. The hits were believed to be from 12.7-millimeter or .50-caliber weapons.³⁵⁰

The work by Skyraiders was recognized by those directly involved. U. S. Army 1st Lieutenant Karl J. Rodenhouser wrote about a clash in February 1969. He wrote:

Elements of the ARVN 3rd Armored Cavalry came under enemy mortar attack and sniper fire. After requesting air support a flight of Spads arrived and after learning of where and what the threat was began to place their ordnance against the enemy. The desire of the two pilots to place their ordnance precisely and effectively is in itself worthy of commendation; that both pilots continually made passes in an area where heavy 12.7-millimeter fire had damaged a FAC aircraft and two helicopters poignantly shows the sincere dedication and distinguished flying on their part in the fight. Their zeal was instrumental in assuring the continued request for USAF fighters in general and Spads in particular.³⁵¹

In a March 1969 letter of appreciation, Lieutenant Colonel Andrew J. Marquis, Army Special Forces commander at Ben Het, wrote:

It is the considered judgment of the commander that the unit's success in evacuating its wounded and managing to return to other friendly forces in the area was the result of the invaluable aid and support rendered to the unit by the Spads. While the unit was withdrawing, the Spads with apparent regard only for the friendly ground forces safety covered their withdrawal accurately and with extreme tactical success, napalming the positions and avenues of approach of pursuing enemy forces.³⁵²

³⁵⁰ H633SOW, Volume III, January–March 1969, 13.

³⁵¹ Wendell A. Kerr, Master Sergeant, USAF, Unit historian, History of the 633rd Special Operations Wing, July–September 1969, attached History of the 6th Special Operations Squadron, 8. (Hereinafter referred to as KH633SOW, date, and page number.)

³⁵² KH633SOW, July–September 1969, attached History of the 6th Special Operations Squadron, 6.

March 29, 1968 was an unusual day for the 6th Spads when two SAR efforts occurred. At 0945, Spad 11 and 12, with Majors Farnham and Glen L. Robertson scrambled to the area northwest of Khe Sanh Valley to assist in the rescue of an F-4 pilot, call sign Elliot 03A. The flight rendezvoused with two Jolly Greens from Quang Tri Air Base. The Jolly's were escorted over heavily defended enemy territory. Escort was difficult due to heavy haze to twelve thousand feet and greatly restricted visibility. The flight reached the rescue area where Sandy 01 had already taken hits, but had the area neutralized. The Jolly Green went in and spent about twenty minutes of hover because the PJ had to assist the badly injured survivor on the ground.³⁵³

Jolly Green 28 held clear while Sandys, Hobos, and Spads provided top cover. As soon as the injured pilot was in the helicopter, the Sandy's and Hobos' returned to NKP. Spads 11 and 12 escorted the Jolly Greens back to Quang Tri after Jolly Green 31 delivered the pilot to the hospital ship *Repose*. Just as the Spads left Jolly Green 31 and 28, a Mayday call was heard on guard channel that Detroit 01, a Republic F-105 Thunderchief, was bailing out.³⁵⁴

Captain Thompson, Spad 01, and Lieutenant George W. Norwood, Spad 02, had previously scrambled from Pleiku to insert a SOG team, but diverted to assist in the rescue. The Spads proceeded into the area and started the SAR assisted by Misty 31 and 41. Spad 01 made multiple passes through the area without drawing ground enemy fire and decided to send in the rescue helicopter. Jolly Green 21 came in and made the pickup while Spad 01 and 02 provided air cover and suppressed ground fire. The rescue was successful and all aircraft returned to base with a very happy Detroit 01.³⁵⁵

³⁵³ H633SOW, Volume III, January–March 1969, 17.

³⁵⁴ H633SOW, Volume III, January–March 1969, 17.

³⁵⁵ H633SOW, Volume III, January – March 1969, 18.

While stationed in the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment during a second tour in late 1969, Sergeant Thompson explained his observations of Skyraiders in action. The Blackhawk Base Camp at Xuan Los, South Vietnam came under strong Viet Cong and North Vietnamese regular army attack. Skyraiders answered the assistance call after the attack began. They fought off the intense enemy attack by placing ordnance where it was needed. Weapons delivery was most effective and the enemy was forced to withdraw. The base returned to normal operations the next morning and subsequent area checks revealed that the enemy had fled the field. While Sergeant Thompson could not identify the squadron or nationality of the Skyraiders, this fact did not matter at all; the A-1s had prevented the base camp from being overrun. Many Americans and their Vietnamese allies survived to fight another day.³⁵⁶

One of the more interesting maintenance practices quietly carried out at Pleiku involved swapping of “damaged” 300-gallon aircraft centerline tanks for steaks. During the night shift, “damaged” tanks were taken to the engine run tie-down area where a deal was consummated. The targeted tank had been jettisoned from the aircraft and received some dents. These “damaged” tanks were no longer allowed to be used on the Skyraiders, so they would be scrapped. Someone learned that the Army at Camp Holloway wanted the tanks. The Army cleaned the tanks and recycled them as overhead water holding tanks for soldiers’ showers. Every once in a while, a request came into the maintainers and they provided a “damaged” tank for the deal. This practice was about the only way the maintainers could acquire steaks for squadron parties or late night food when the dining hall was closed.³⁵⁷

³⁵⁶ Thompson interview.

³⁵⁷ Beam interview.

Maintenance personnel had little problem in maintaining the Skyraider. The aircraft was rugged, easy to keep in good shape, and able to absorb battle damage from small arms up to large modern anti-aircraft guns. The only major issue was the Wright R-3350 engine. The problem was not due to design, but the number of spare engines available for the Skyraiders fighting the war. Supply could not keep up with the demand. This issue was noted in the January 18, 1968 POM Inspection report “spare engines had not been built up” and “Quick Engine Change kits were not available.”³⁵⁸ During the period just prior to the squadron departing from England Air Force Base, WRSK assets, including engines, were used to support the daily flying schedule there.³⁵⁹ In a typical month, the squadron experienced fourteen air/ground aborts; nine were in the air and five on the ground. Engines were the major cause of aborts.³⁶⁰

Aircraft incidents were numerous. Crew chief Sergeant Bob Weikart recalled “one of the most colorful Skyraiders belonging to the 6th SOS was *Spad Dad*.³⁶¹ The A-1H, serial number 52-137552, was Lieutenant Colonel Sam Berman, the squadron commander’s aircraft.³⁶² The rudder and vertical stabilizer had been painted with large red, white, and blue vertical stripes. The blue stripe was scalloped. The paint scheme represented the World War I French-built American-piloted aircraft that had the same paint scheme painted on their tails. *Spad Dad* was destroyed December 29, 1969 near NKP after receiving anti-aircraft ground fire.³⁶³

³⁵⁸ POM, 3.

³⁵⁹ WH1ACW, July – December 1967, Attachment 1, 6.

³⁶⁰ H633SOW, October – December 1968, 34, Attachment, unnumbered page.

³⁶¹ Bob Weikart, Sergeant, USAF, Crew chief. Interviewed by author, Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, Pleiku Air Base Reunion, September 18–20, 2009.

³⁶² Beam interview.

³⁶³ H633SOW, Volume II, January–March 1969, 7a.

Rumors concerning the future of the 6th SOS became fact when a 7th Air Force message arrived in June 1969. The message indicated the desirability to consolidate all Skyraiders at one location. Under the proposal, aircraft and personnel of the 6th would transfer to the 56th SOW at NKP. Also, operating locations would be established at DaNang and Pleiku for SAR support. Rational for consolidation was it would be advantageous operationally to consolidate Skyraiders at NKP where additional aircraft would afford greater scheduling flexibility to meet mission requirements in all area of South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Economy through a single management of resources was a major consideration.³⁶⁴

As the movement was planned, the flying continued. SAR duty demanded pilots had to deal with unknowns and emergencies that popped up unexpectedly. Lieutenant Jensen recalled:

For me July 19, 1969 was like most any day in Vietnam. Rather restless because I hadn't flown for three days and since the aircraft had not been flown in four days, I knew that two aircraft would takeoff two hours prior to sunset and provide an airborne alert force. The Skyraider carried enough fuel and easily covered the alert commitment.³⁶⁵

He managed to get on the flying schedule and "felt pretty good about chances to fly that day.

"We lived and breathed our lives as fighter pilots committed to combat and to fly, fly, fly."³⁶⁶

Jensen continued:

The briefing, preflight, and taxi were uneventful. I was number 2 in a flight of two and began takeoff roll at normal interval with the flight leader. At 400–500 feet of altitude, a red steady oil sump light [Chip Light] caught my attention. It indicated that metal was flowing through the oil system and could be a warning of imminent engine failure. I had been briefed to treat all oil sump lights with the same urgency as a fire warning light in a jet.³⁶⁷

³⁶⁴ KH633SOW, July–September 1969, 24.

³⁶⁵ KH633SOW, July – September 1969, 17.

³⁶⁶ Jensen interview.

³⁶⁷ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-01, 5-4.

Jensen considered jettisoning the 6000 pounds of ordnance and external fuel tanks, but since he was over DaNang decided to retain the stores in order to not injure any civilians. Notifying lead and the tower, he declared an emergency.³⁶⁸

Once Jensen declared the emergency, “I was sure that I would have a clear runway.” He devoted the majority of attention to look for unpopulated areas to park the aircraft if the engine quit. Jensen carried 20 knots extra airspeed in the event the engine quit and forced a bail out. At this point teamwork between a pilot in an emergency and the control tower failed. As Jensen was busy flying and monitoring the engine, the tower cleared a civilian airliner to land. The tower later explained that combat rules allowed sequencing of normal flights with emergency traffic. Since Jensen was preoccupied, he either never heard this call or did not perceive the consequence that lay ahead as he expected a clear runway to land on.³⁶⁹

Jensen lined up on and concentrated on landing, 20 knots hot with heavy combat loaded Skyraider. During the landing flare, he caught a first glimpse of the big airliner in front of him. With a sound engine, he would have executed a go-around, but this was impossible since he was anticipating imminent engine failure.³⁷⁰ The airline captain must have been aware of the emergency because he called the tower advising “he would exit the runway on a diagonal high-speed taxiway.” The transport started to turn off the runway and this would have cleared it for Jensen’s high speed landing roll out. The tower responded, “Negative, Negative—roll to the end!” The airliner turned back and nearly stopped in front of the fast approaching Jensen.³⁷¹

³⁶⁸ Jensen interview.

³⁶⁹ Jensen interview.

³⁷⁰ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 5-4.

³⁷¹ Jensen interview.

With the extra airspeed, Jensen quickly ate the distance between the Skyraider and the airliner. It became apparent that in spite of maximum braking he would collide with the airliner. To avoid this, Jensen tapped the right brake trying to steer around the airliner. As he drifted past the airliner's right wingtip, he tried to realign with the runway centerline, but the Skyraider did not respond—most likely because the brakes had been used up on the high speed landing roll. The Skyraider rolled off the runway. Emergency procedure for going off of a runway to an unprepared surface was to raise the landing gear to avoid flipping over.³⁷² Knowing this, Jensen raised the landing gear.³⁷³ Unfortunately, this action ruptured the fuel tank beneath the aircraft and started the Skyraider on fire, most likely due to spilled fuel on the hot brakes.³⁷⁴

As the aircraft halted, Jensen executed an emergency ground egress. These were practiced by Skyraider pilots monthly.³⁷⁵ He opened the canopy and reached for a lever on the right side of the seat. It needed to be rotated 110 degrees to release him from all straps and the emergency seat kit. As most things were going that day, the canopy opened normally, but Jensen was unable to escape the burning aircraft. One fitting failed to release and he remained hooked to the burning aircraft, unable to move away. Flames increased in intensity as the fire spread. Jensen felt pangs of panic and for the first time had the sinking feeling he was not going to get out of the damaged aircraft. As Jensen felt himself getting burned, he recalled: “Les, you are the only one who can get you out of this aircraft. SO SLOW DOWN, UNLATCH THE GOD DAMN FITTING, AND GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!”³⁷⁶

³⁷² Jensen interview.

³⁷³ KH633SOW, July–September 1969, 17.

³⁷⁴ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 5-8.

³⁷⁵ NAVWEPS 01-40ALF-1, 5-15.

³⁷⁶ Jensen interview.

Slowing down, he worked on the fitting holding him in the burning airplane. It finally released and Jensen was able to stand up and step on the right wing then sliding off, to the ground. There, he was assisted by a fireman who helped him to a HH-43 Pedro helicopter. As Jensen looked back at the burning Skyraider, it was totally engulfed in flames. Although Jensen had no way to calculate this, he was sure that there was only 20–30 seconds remaining to escape the inferno. The fireman had made three attempts to get to Jensen out of the cockpit, but had been blown off the wing by exploding ordnance under the aircraft. Almost one-quarter of the young pilot's body had been burned while trapped in the aircraft.³⁷⁷

On July 23, 1969, Majors Franklin W. Picking and Thomas H. McCarty, while flying an A-1G, were lost to hostile ground fire. They took off from Pleiku on an in-country mission near An Khe. The mission was McCarty's first and Picking was to demonstrate various ordnance delivery techniques. Picking sat in the left seat and was the instructor pilot. After the third pass, the Skyraider was observed taking hits in the right wing during the pull off. The aircraft banked to the right and crashed. There were no radio calls from the stricken aircraft. The lead aircraft initiated rescue operations and the SAR continued to until weather and darkness closed in. Two days later, an Army team recovered the bodies of both pilots. They were still in the aircraft.³⁷⁸

When the 633rd Wing stood up on July 15, 1968 it only had the 6th ACS assigned as a flying squadron.³⁷⁹ A second Skyraider-equipped squadron was planned to join the wing later. A PACAF message arrived at Pleiku on September 6, 1968, and outlined the schedule for the

³⁷⁷ Jensen interview and KH633SOW, July–September 1969, 17. [During the interview with Captain O. E. “Stretch” Ballmes, it was discovered that the Skyraider Lieutenant Jensen had flown on July 19, 1969 as “*Boisterous Ben*.” *Boisterous Ben* was A-1H, serial number 52-137520. “Stretch” had earlier claimed and named as his own personal aircraft. “Stretch” knew *Boisterous Ben* had been destroyed, but did not know the whole story of the loss.]

³⁷⁸ KH633SOW, July–September 1969, 16 – 17.

³⁷⁹ KH633SOW, July–September 1968, 1.

adding a Skyraider force build-up in South East Asia. The 23rd SOS was to join the wing after the New Year, but the planned date could slip.³⁸⁰ The recommendation to increase the Skyraider strength with the 23rd SOS slipped again. After December 31, 1968 the idea was dropped.³⁸¹

Next, a major organizational change was accomplished when the alert SAR force was removed from the 6th SOS and placed under the control of the 633rd SOW. The new unit was designated OL-1 and a commander was assigned on a 30-day rotational basis. The unit used the tail code 6T.³⁸² The fact that the Air Force considered phasing down Skyraider combat operations at Pleiku moved from the rumor stage to announced policy during the early part of the July–September quarter. Just what the effect this phase-down/phase-out would have was not entirely clear. One fact was known for sure: the men of the 6th SOS and personnel in other units directly supporting them would be affected. The 6th continued flying.³⁸³

JUL–SEP 1969 SORTIES FLOWN³⁸⁴				
Sorties	JUL	AUG	SEP	TOTAL
Combat	292	238	172	702
Total	442	450	356	1,228
Hours	975	1,109	978	3,063

President Richard Nixon promised to end the war and supported Vietnamization. The plan called for increased aid to South Vietnam’s military forces so American ground forces could leave. On September 15, 1969, Air Force OPLAN 183-70 called for redeployment of selected

³⁸⁰ H633SOW, Volume III, January–March 1969, 25 - 26.

³⁸¹ MH633SOW, October–December 1968, 24.

³⁸² KH633SOW, July–September 1969, 1.

³⁸³ KH633SOW, July–September 1969, 5.

³⁸⁴ KH633SOW, July–September 1969, 10.

Air Force units from the Republic of Vietnam prior to cessation of American land hostilities. This was part of the Vietnamization of the war—the gradual assumption of an increased combat role by the South Vietnamese. The old and slow Skyraider was well liked by the South Vietnamese Air Force and considered easier to maintain than the newer jet aircraft they received: Cessna AT-37 Dragonfly and the Northrop F-5 Tiger II. Also, USAF senior leadership was happy to transfer Skyraiders, rather than incur the costs to return the aircraft to the United States. Vietnamization ended the 6th Special Operations Squadrons existence. The squadron's aircraft were divided between other Air Force squadrons (eight) or South Vietnamese Air Force (ten).³⁸⁵

The massive increase in Skyraiders provided to the RVNAF did not come without problems. To maintain and fly the aircraft created increased demands on the South Vietnamese Air Force. In country American supply assets had to be transferred and recorded. Additionally, Vietnamese Air Force pilots faced the same resistance to the propeller-powered Skyraiders: they were old and slow. Why was the American Air Force so willing to provide the Skyraiders to the Vietnamese? Was the aircraft safe? Why not provide more AT-37s and F-5s? Even if there was top level resentment, Skyraiders were quickly incorporated in the war against the enemy.³⁸⁶

On September 20, 1969, 7th AF OPOD 183-70 implemented OPLAN 183-70. One Skyraider consolidation plan supporter was the 56th SOW at NKP. That unit would gain personnel and some Skyraiders. Inactivation of the 6th SOS was imminent.³⁸⁷ Even while rumors spread, the men of the 6th SOS maintained their teamwork, camaraderie, and professionalism. Combat sorties for the third quarter reached 1228, while the number of sorties

³⁸⁵ Wayne Mutza, *The A-1 Skyraider in Vietnam*. (Atglen: Schiffer Military History, 2003, Appendix D: U.S. Air Force Skyraiders, 188–199.

³⁸⁶ Mutza, 144–145.

³⁸⁷ James H. Lund, Captain, USAF, Unit historian 56th Special Operations Wing, Jul–Sep 1969, Volume I, 15–16. (Hereinafter referred to as LH56SOW, date, and page number.)

flown totaled 1455. During this period, SAR activity remained light due to the Southwest monsoons. Due to light activity and the turnover of experienced personnel, new personnel used the period to train for the SAR role. The monsoon weather affected the ability of the Skyraiders to find and strike targets and the enemy to conduct hostile military actions. The squadron picked up a new mission; escorting Sikorsky CH-54 Skycrane helicopters from Vietnam to Thailand.³⁸⁸

The squadron created a special study “A-1/Fast Mover Tactics and Survivability Comparison.” The study was prepared by Skyraider pilots comparing tactics and survivability with high-performance (fast mover) jet aircraft. The study was primarily to dispel several misconceptions of new FACs and mission planners on the Skyraider’s tactical capability and environmental survivability. The writer concluded:

There is a misconception that the Skyraider, by virtue of its slow speed and relatively low operating altitude, is highly vulnerable to ground fire. This would be undoubtedly true if the Skyraider made long straight-as-an-arrow approaches into a target as the fast movers do. But, that is not how Skyraiders fly against the enemy.³⁸⁹

Aircraft losses became an issue during the third quarter of 1969. The Air Force notified the wing that the two Skyraiders lost during July would not be replaced. The number of Skyraiders dropped from eighteen single seat and four side-by-side variants to seventeen and three. No matter how the need for the replacement Skyraiders was explained: lack of training aircraft, anticipated combat requirements, and downgrading the wing’s combat capabilities; there would be no new aircraft. The wing faced dramatic changes and could do nothing about them.³⁹⁰

The value of having maintainers perform the end-of-runway inspection resulted in saving of critical Skyraiders. During a massive fragged mission from NKP, Sergeant McAskill recalled:

³⁸⁸ KH633SOW, July–September 1969, 9, 13.

³⁸⁹ KH633SOW, July–September 1969, 16.

³⁹⁰ KH633SOW, July–September 1969, 18.

I had to send one on the Skyraiders back to the launch area when a deeply cut tire was discovered and it was not safe to send the aircraft on the mission. The pilot was not happy, but he turned the aircraft around and later flew in another scheduled mission. I felt satisfied with my decision because the tire was deeply cut and the reinforcement cords were showing through the rubber. That tire could have exploded on takeoff.³⁹¹

On November 12, 1969, a costly SAR involved the 6th SOS. Captains Jon K. Bodahl, pilot, and Harry W. Smith, weapons systems officer; were the crew of a F4E Phantom, call sign Packard 01. They were the lead F-4 in a flight assisting recovery of a two-man helicopter crew, call sign Owl 07, shot down on 11 November. The FAC directed Packard flight to attack an enemy helicopter operating near the rescue of the downed airmen. The fighters reported sighting the helicopter, but were unable to get a shot at it.³⁹² During the SAR efforts, the FAC directed other aircraft to assault antiaircraft sites, heavy weapons positions, and troop concentrations hidden in the dense jungle. Attacking aircraft used bombs, rockets, CBU-22s and strafing runs against the enemy. The efforts were successful and another attempt to recover the second crewman from Owl 07 began. He was extracted, but in the process, an A-1H, Spad 02, was lost. Major Gerald R. Helmich's aircraft was struck by heavy antiaircraft fire and crashed. He was the last 6th SOS member lost.³⁹³

The 6th SOS was inactivated November 15, 1969.³⁹⁴ Crew chief Beam recalled that the inactivation and move to NKP was due to downsizing of American personnel in Vietnam.³⁹⁵ For a short period the DaNang alert Skyraiders were still on a temporary duty assignment. Personnel

³⁹¹ McAskill interview.

³⁹² KH633SOW, July–September 1969, 17

³⁹³ KH633SOW, July – September 1969, 17.

³⁹⁴ History of the 6th Special Operations Squadron, provided by Keith Alexander, Historian, Interview by author August 5 – 7, 2009. (Hereinafter referred to as Unit history.)

³⁹⁵ Beam interview.

rotated between DaNang and NKP. The only difference was the changed tail code from ET to 6T. The Skyraiders retained the Spad call sign.³⁹⁶

The Skyraider story did not end when the Vietnam Peace Accords were signed. Lessons learned were incorporated into design of a modern Skyraider replacement; an aircraft that could survive in the close air support role the Air Force was committed to retain. Skyraider pilots were involved in the design and flight competition that resulted in the selection of the Fairchild-Republic A-10 Thunderbolt II. The A-10 inherited the legacy established by the Skyraider and the 6th ACS in Vietnam. Thunderbolt II aircraft continued the lower, slower, and closer mission. Added to A-10 success during Desert Storm is new research and planning to acquire another lower, slower, and closer aircraft for armed reconnaissance roles. This role is reappearing in the Afghan mountains where fast movers such as the F-15, F-16 and F/A-18 are experiencing difficulties in identifying and then engaging enemy positions. Again the legacy of the Skyraider remains: lower, slower, and closer where the teamwork between those on the ground and those in the air continues.³⁹⁷

³⁹⁶ Unit history, no page numbers.

³⁹⁷ Bill Sweetman, "Keep It Simple." *Aviation Week and Space Technology*. February 8, 2010, (New York: McGraw-Hill Companies, 2010, 39–40 and Marcus Weisgerber, "The Light Attack Aircraft." *Air Force Magazine*. January 2010, 56–58.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

Concern over Soviet control in Eastern Europe and a growing spread of Communist influence was countered by the United States and its allies. While facing the Soviet threat, the American military decided to modernize its air power from propeller- to jet- powered aircraft. Older propeller aircraft were replaced with advanced jet-propelled planes. Senior military leadership desired a modern, effective jet-powered air arm better able to counter the Soviet threat and subscribed to a “Europe first” strategy. When the growing American military involvement in Southeast Asia began to compete with the Europe first strategy and jet powered modernization program, senior military leaders had to reevaluate their decision process.

The 6th Air Commando Squadron (later designated 6th Special Operations Squadron) was created to meet military needs and acknowledged shortfalls in the Air Force’s ability to provide close air support. These shortfalls resulted both from senior Air Force and the political leadership’s concentration on a perceived Soviet threat and attempts to design and acquire more modern jet-powered aircraft. Design considerations did not include close air support. Lessons about close air support previously learned during World War II and Korea had been forgotten in the rush to acquire newer, faster, and longer-range aircraft.³⁹⁸

Events in Southeast Asia began to place increased demands on the American military. In addition to providing equipment to the Republic of South Vietnam through the Military Assistance Command, the American military was tasked to provide training.³⁹⁹ While the program continued to grow through the early 1960s, it began to conflict with the concentration

³⁹⁸ Unit History, 6th SOS, 2.

³⁹⁹ Ballmes, Dineen, and Reeves interviews.

on the Soviet Union and Europe. While the Southeast Asia Theater helped push the Air Force to achieve modernization goals in replacing propeller- with jet-powered aircraft, it also increased demands for men and equipment.⁴⁰⁰

The Military Assistance Command in Vietnam appeared to help forward the Air Forces' modernization programs to the all jet-powered aircraft they desired. MACV transferred propeller-powered Cessna 0-1 Birdog observation, Curtiss C-46 Commando cargo transports, Douglas C-47 Skytrain cargo transports, and North American T-28 Trojan trainers to the South Vietnamese Air Force, but it also required personnel to conduct training. The need for support drew off experienced maintenance personnel and pilots on top of numerous support and logistics specialists needed to control the South Vietnam military aid program. The growing commitment affected USAF planning. As the military became more involved in a counter-insurgency war it was not quite sure how to prosecute the effort. Modern jets were not designed for the type of warfare in which America was becoming involved in Southeast Asia. As the USAF became more involved in the war effort, senior leadership began to hear requests an aircraft better suited to fight the war.⁴⁰¹

In June 1963, the Air Force selected the US Navy's Douglas Skyraider for evaluation as a suitable aircraft for the growing counter-insurgency needs in Southeast Asia.⁴⁰² The Skyraider was recognized for its capabilities and was scheduled to be phased out by the Navy during its aircraft modernization program. The Skyraider represented a hands-on asset, was available, and had an existing logistics system of supply and repair facilities.⁴⁰³ Navy Skyraiders in storage

⁴⁰⁰ Blair interview.

⁴⁰¹ Unit History, 6th SOS, 2.

⁴⁰² Blair interview.

⁴⁰³ O and R, 2.

were transferred to the Air Force and overhauled. After the overhaul, Skyraiders continued their journey to the West Coast and final shipment onboard ships to Southeast Asia. Prior to shipment, the Skyraiders were modernized by installing the Stanley Ejection System and Air Force-mandated radio equipment.⁴⁰⁴

With selection of the Skyraider, the Air Force began to qualify maintainers and pilots. The Air Force filled positions in a new squadron and those selected attended Skyraider pilot training at Hurlburt Field, Florida while enlisted personnel attended maintenance courses. Pilots attended aircraft courses in which they learned the Skyraider, ordnance, and delivery procedures for the numerous weapons that the aircraft could utilize.⁴⁰⁵

After training was completed, maintainers and pilots transferred to England Air Force Base, Louisiana. England was the home of the new squadron. It began with seven officers and twenty-two enlisted airmen.⁴⁰⁶ Practice, practice, practice was the order of the day, but there was not enough aircraft, maintainers, or supplies.⁴⁰⁷ While at England Air Force Base, maintainers and pilots began to form a team.⁴⁰⁸ The atmosphere surrounding the squadron was one of controlled chaos.⁴⁰⁹ Teamwork and camaraderie developed out of a strong sense of purpose and dedication. The squadron organized itself because of individual professionalism

⁴⁰⁴ PH6CSG, January–March 1968, 3.

⁴⁰⁵ Ballmes, Blair, Dineen, Richardson, and Reeves interviews.

⁴⁰⁶ WH1ACW, Jul–Dec 1967, 19.

⁴⁰⁷ POM, 1–3, Attachment 1 and 3.

⁴⁰⁸ Ballmes, Beam, Blair, Hoover, and Reeves interviews.

⁴⁰⁹ POM, 4.

and resolve. In spite of conditions beyond its control, the 6th ACS attained a combat ready posture and unit went to the Southeast Asian conflict.⁴¹⁰

The squadron quickly settled in to Pleiku Air Base, Republic of Vietnam. While waiting for its own aircraft, it used four 1st ACS A-1Es. Missions were scheduled and pilots became combat qualified. Maintenance personnel worked round-the-clock seven days a week to provide support. The new squadron continued to work as a well-knit team.⁴¹¹ When word reached the squadron that its Skyraiders had arrived in South Vietnam, teams were assembled and traveled to the location to ready them for their flight back to Pleiku. By the end of March 1968, the squadron began combat operations in Southeast Asia under the call sign “Spad.”⁴¹²

The 6th ACS mission was in five parts: provide direct support for Operation Prairie Fire, air escort for search and rescue efforts, air escort for defoliation missions, road interdiction, and forward air controller missions. Daily sorties along with Prairie Fire or Mayday missions, were flown. Both the Prairie Fire (air support for Special Forces teams) and SAR (search and rescue for downed aviators) missions demanded the most and placed tremendous pressure on those involved. Maintainers worked hard to provide safe and reliable aircraft to the pilots who flew the dangerous combat missions. Maintenance and pilots knew and understood the importance of achieving success. Success in these missions meant friendly forces were saved or rescued from a dangerous enemy.⁴¹³ While the 6th ACS engaged the enemy across Southeast Asia, in North and South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, the squadron experienced losses. The warning words of

⁴¹⁰ POM, 2.

⁴¹¹ PH6CSG, January–March 1968, 3.

⁴¹² Ballmes, Dineen, Reeves interviews and PH633CSG, January–March 1968, 3.

⁴¹³ PH633SOW, Volume I, July–September 1968, 20.

Lieutenant Colonel Ford when he said “One of you will not come back” came true.⁴¹⁴ In the short period the squadron existed, from March 1968 to November 15, 1969, eleven pilots died.⁴¹⁵

Maintainers and pilots formed a strong team and comradeship was evident. Within a year the squadron set a milestone, over 4,100 hours flown. While both served in the same hostile environment, their duties were very different. They worked together, maintenance providing safe aircraft, pilots performing combat mission aggressively. Trust between the two became unmistakable and expanded beyond whatever and wherever the 6th was called on. Almost from the squadrons beginning the 6th ACS provided close air support to hard pressed friendly forces across Southeast Asia.⁴¹⁶

Prairie Fire emergencies demanded the best from Skyraider pilots. SOG teams only called when they were in extreme danger. Professionalism and success grew as teamwork between ground and air components were tested again and again. FACs calling “hit my smoke!” appreciated the effectiveness and dedication of the Spad Skyriders. Again, teamwork became more than just a word. During SAR efforts, Jolly Green helicopters relied on Skyriders to protect them when they were most vulnerable: hovering over a downed aviator. The bonds of trust were openly expressed when the DaNang Skyraider detachment was forced to threaten to return to Pleiku. The 37th ARRS commander quickly stepped in and offered its maintenance resources. It also provided better housing for the Skyraider alert force moving the men from tents to air-conditioned facilities. These efforts continued teamwork and reinforced bonds between the units that remain in effect today.⁴¹⁷

⁴¹⁴ Ballmes interview.

⁴¹⁵ Unit history, no page number.

⁴¹⁶ Reeves, 51.

⁴¹⁷ Dineen interview.

Teamwork continued during SAR efforts as they expanded to include modern fast movers; F-4s, F-100s and F-105s, all designed to replace the propeller-powered Skyraider. Uniquely, fast movers depended on Skyraiders to control, locate, and eliminate ground threats when one of their own was shot down. The Skyraider went lower, slower and closer. Many pilots declared “there is nothing better than seeing a Skyraider overhead during rescue.”⁴¹⁸ While the Skyraiders abilities excelled in close air support roles, especially when friendly forces needed ordnance placed close to their position, or ground fire interrupted an ongoing SAR, the only role the aircraft was not considered successful was night escort for silenced C-123 aircraft. The Skyraiders just made too much noise with the big Wright R-3350 engine and its short exhaust stacks.⁴¹⁹

For example, in April 1968, Major General O. M. Barsanti, the United State Army’s 101st Airborne Division commanding general, stated:

I wish to extend my personal appreciation . . . for the truly magnificent air support we have received since our arrival in Vietnam in mid-December. Particularly outstanding is the support we have been receiving in our area of operation in the I Corps tactical zone where our paratroopers consider tactical air power as their true supporter in the fortified villages of this coastal plain and triple-canopy, jungle-clad mountains in which they fight.⁴²⁰

The professionalism, teamwork, and camaraderie of the 6th Special Operations Squadron still exist today. Reunions bring out “war stories” and the often claim on “Who is the best fighter pilot still alive?”⁴²¹ Maintainers remember their aircraft, the heat and humidity, pilots, launches and recoveries, and losses. When meeting at reunions, one of the first questions is “Do

⁴¹⁸ Dineen interview.

⁴¹⁹ H633^fSOW, Volume III, January–March 1969, 21.

⁴²⁰ AFP 190-1, 26.

⁴²¹ Ballmes interview.

you remember their Skyraider or sergeant so and so?” All remember working 12-hour shifts seven days a week.⁴²² Most answer the question “What was the best aircraft you worked on?” with “The Skyraider!” Others recall different things: launching an aircraft that did not return, watching a rescued pilot step off a Jolly Green Giant helicopter, or when they completed their tour and went home. Most remember the sound of a Viet Cong rocket or mortar, their sudden explosions, and the distinct sound as they traveled toward the base prior to impact. Pilots remember the Skyraider, how it flew, mission flown, and the gratitude they felt when thanked by some unknown soldier. Most pilots declare that the Skyraider was the best aircraft they flew. There is a strong sense of personal satisfaction achieved and is still evident when talking about the squadron. They remember working on a dirty, oily aircraft pressed into service by an Air Force that did not design it, and did not understand its capabilities.⁴²³

There is a short poem or phrase about the Douglas Skyraider. It goes:

SKYRAIDER . . . SUPER SPAD . . . A-1 . . . Built for an older war. They found a place in Southeast Asian skies and in the hearts of men who dared to master two thousand seven hundred horsepower. Remember how they flew at A-Shau . . . Khe Sanh . . . across the burning Plain of Jars . . . Son Tay . . . They never asked for glory or a hero’s place, but only for one more pass . . . to fly and fight. And if your memory dims, go ask the infantryman who watched them from the battles ragged front beneath the jungle trees. Ask the FACs Firefly . . . Hobo . . . Spad . . . Hit my smoke or ask a rescued pilot what the call sign Spad means. Their wings were stained with oil and 20-millimeter cannon smoke. Their Valor was as bright as burning steel and when they fell they took an honor guard of enemy to tramp behind on their final march. Faintly, heard from far away, the distant thunder of their engine rises through the evening calm. Phantom wingmen, off to war, fly with us know . . . Forever.⁴²⁴

⁴²² Beam, Hoover, McAskill, Yockum, Richardson and Weikart interviews.

⁴²³ Reeves interview.

⁴²⁴ Anonymous poem circulated in the Air Force and well known to Skyraider maintainers and pilots. Copy discovered in an Air Force Magazine in 1975 and displayed on a Philippine mahogany wall plaque owned by the author. Another copy discovered on the A-1 Skyraider newsletter excerpts. Titled Skyraider by Mike Byers, the article appeared in the July 1995 edition of the Skyraider Association Newsletter.

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