

Spin in an O-1E Bird Dog in Combat

By: James Kraft

In May 1968, I found myself in Vietnam as an O-1E Bird Dog FAC at Can Tho Army Airfield in the Mekong Delta. Can Tho AAF was two miles northwest of the City of Can Tho, the capital of Phong Dinh Province. Can Tho was located along the Bassac River, a southern tributary of the mighty Mekong River. Ben Thuy Air Base, a joint VNAF and USAF base was west about eight miles, all being south of Saigon some seventy miles.

At the time arrived, I was replacing the former province FAC who was rotating back to the states. I was a captain at the time, later promoted to major during my tour. I commanded a Tactical Air Control Party (TACP) that had two O-1E Bird Dogs located in protective revetments and the sole USAF aircraft on the field.

After a one-flight checkout flight by my predecessor, he split for the states. From mid-May until August, I was the Air Liaison Officer to the ARVN and the only FAC at the TACP. My team consisted of two crew chiefs, two radio operators and an intelligence specialist. The crew chiefs maintained the aircraft at the field, while my radio operators and Intel guy were co-located in the City of Can Tho with Army advisors and ARVN command post. The opportunity to show up in the morning select a Bird Dog to go fly was quite exhilarating. Visual reconnaissance seemed to take a secondary role, as controlling air strikes was my primary activity. I was flying 70-80 hours a month and sometimes controlling 3-4 air strikes a day.

In August I had a new First Lieutenant, fresh out of pilot training assigned to help out with the flying. He was assigned to me to be his mentor and instructor. Al was eager and enthusiastic guy. He enjoyed the opportunity to fly at every opportunity to build his flying time and experience. So when there was a lull at the airstrips, he took-off in either aircraft, flew visual reconnaissance and got better acquainted with the area.

In the early days of his tour, I would have him ride in the back seat and observe me control air strikes to get the hang of the procedures and in handling the radios. Dealing with 2-3 radios and the need to change frequencies to talk to fighter aircraft and ground control could be quite a handful.

After about 6-8 such flights, I decided that it was time for Al to take control and FAC a mission for himself. If it all went well, I'd turn him loose to control air strikes on his own. So on a pre-planned ARVN approved target, off we went with Al in the front seat. The target this day was in the western portion of the province. It was a group of huts or "hooches" along a tree-lined canal and a suspected Viet Cong stronghold. The terrain in the Mekong Delta was flat, water covered rice patties contained by earthen dikes and canals and rivers lined with palms, banana and other trees.

At the appointed time, a set of AT-37 "Tweetie Birds" checked in on the designated frequency. Normally, the Bird Dog operated at 2000 feet during an air strike. Al directed the fighters into the target area by describing visual landmarks. He conducted the usual pre-strike briefing and things were progressing quite well.

We usually operated roughly a quarter of a mile offset from the target, flying parallel to the desired flight path of the strike aircraft. When time came to call in the lead, we would throttle back, roll into a 90-degree turn and dive toward the target. Then using a grease pencil sighting mark on the Plexiglas windshield, one would lineup the target and fire a 2.75mm white phosphorus rocket. When it hit the ground it exploded into a white puff of smoke. Thus, we would verbally adjust the lead fighter from the actual target via directions in meters left or right or long or short from the smoke mark.

Al proceeded with the pre-strike briefing, although he did appear a bit anxious, which seemed understandable to me. When it came time to mark the target, Al throttled back, rolled in a quickly left turn applying extremely hard pressure on the control stick and accidentally put the Bird Dog into a spin. After about a turn or so, we both realized what had happen, we both pushed the stick forward and applying hard right rudder. The Bird Dog recovered at about 900 feet and we both applied power and climbed to the entry altitude. Al had regained his senses and was again in full control of the aircraft. He turned back over his shoulder, a bit wide-eyed, flushed in the face, and said "whew"!

When we again reached operating altitude, Al had regained his composure, and then on, the air strike went off without a hitch. It was quite possible that the AT-37 pilots didn't even realize what had happen, and we didn't ask. Needless to say, I too felt a sense of relief. The strike went well and I Ok'd Al to go on his own. After that; however, I was cautious to "ham handling" of the aircraft during the excitement of controlling an air strike. Al served with me for another couple of months at Can Tho, controlling numerous air strikes and gaining lots of flying experience. He moved on to another FAC location in the Delta and served successfully, gaining invaluable experience as a FAC and gained plenty of flying time.

After Al departed, I was assigned one other Lieutenant, also a recently graduated pilot to mentor and checkout as a FAC. His checkout went well and he too moved on to another TACP location in the Delta. I experienced no further "combat" spins during my tour in Vietnam. I departed Vietnam in May 1969 after flying nearly a thousand hours in my beloved, little Bird Dog.

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