THE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE
IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The Advisory Years To 1965

by

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suspended aerial reconnaissance over Laos, and by October Able Mable was flying about eighty-eight percent of its sorties over Vietnam. This sparked the move in December of all four RF-101s to Tan Son Nhut, where they continued to fly 2.8 sorties a day. Flying from Vietnam rather than Thailand widely expanded the total photo coverage per sortie.[55]

Detecting the Viet Cong from the air demanded night and infrared photography, side-looking airborne radar, and infrared "snooper scope" techniques. Most of these methods were still in development. In April 1962 MACV had secured two RB-26C night photo aircraft for Farm Gate, the planes reaching Bien Hoa in May.[56] During the last half of 1962, they gave good service in the face of obstacles. Flash-illuminant cartridges were in short supply. Reflections from flooded rice paddies blurred night photos. A ground accident on October 20 put one RB-26C permanently out of action.[57]

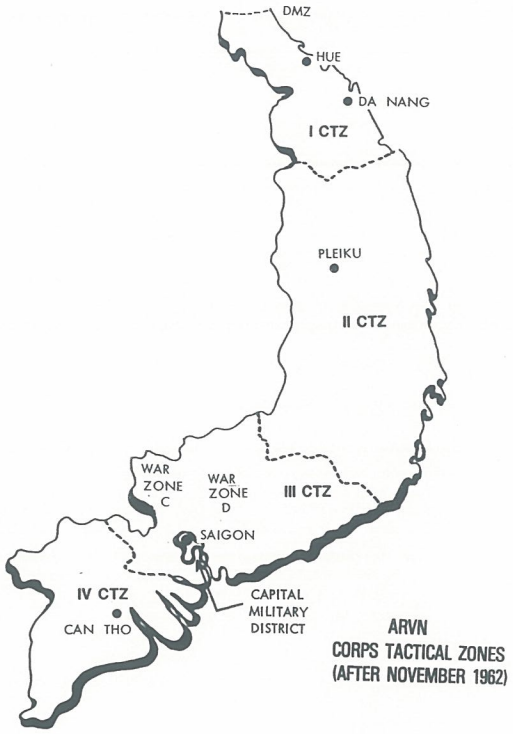
The coming of the Army's 23d Special Air Warfare Detachment to Nha Trang in September 1962 reinforced reconnaissance. The detachment had six OV-1 Mohawk turboprop observation aircraft, rigged with cameras and .50-caliber machineguns. It further featured two portable laboratories to process photographs at division headquarters and at remote locations. Split into teams of two, the OV-1s assumed direct support of Vietnamese ground units. The Mohawks flew mostly visual and photo reconnaissance, but carried Vietnamese observers who could approve targets.[58]

General Anthis still felt it foolish to give aircraft to ground unit commanders. When he protested to General Harkins, the reply was, "We must all be objective." A USAF forward air controller with the 23d Division at Ban Me Thuot noted in November that the Mohawk detachment could make a nine-hour delivery on photo requests, compared to the normal USAF time of seven days. Apprised of this, Anthis could only hope that the U.S. Air Force might not lose assigned roles and missions because of a failure to provide resources to perform them. Even with RF-101s flying from Tan Son Nhut and the photo processing cell working at peak efficiency, photo delivery took from three and one-half to more than five hours. The local Mohawks could deliver emergency photo requests within two to three hours.[59]

Admiral Felt pondered the status of the OV-1s. Was their local employment an economical use of force? Or did their presence ignore the basic U.S. policy of having Americans train the Vietnamese instead of fighting their war for them? Yet General Harkins cited the excellent results chalked up by Mohawks, and on December 14 asked for four more. Like the helicopter gunships, Harkins explained, the OV-1s complemented but did not compete with USAF air power.[60]

Nevertheless, by December 1962 the Army had 199 aircraft in Vietnam, the Air Force 61; there were eight Army generals, three Air Force. As the USAF director of plans noted:

> It may be improper to say we are at war with the Army. However, we believe that if the Army efforts are successful, they may have a long term adverse effect in the U.S. military posture that could be more important than the battle presently being waged with the Viet Cong.[61]



already in Vietnam. In December General Harkins requested two more C-123 squadrons (thirty-two aircraft) and an additional CV-2 company (sixteen planes) for arrival in the first three months of 1963.[16]

At first the Civilian Irregular Defense Group program was managed out of the American Embassy by the CIA. Later the program went under MACV and the U.S. Army Special Forces (Provisional), formed at Nha Trang on September 15, 1962. Working through the tactical air control system and the air operations center, Farm Gate had serviced these units. While General Anthis wished to continue the practice, General Harkins preferred to give the Special Forces their own organic airlift and fire support—a miniature tactical air force. Harkins was thinking of setting aside four L-20s or L-28s for liaison, four CV-2 Caribous for airlift, and twelve UH-1 armed helicopters and four OV-1 Mohawks for strikes. These craft were to be controlled by the Special Forces commander at Nha Trang.

General Anthis dissented on the ground that the twenty-four aircraft would displace the Vietnamese planes at Nha Trang. He remarked that every ground unit could not have "its own separate air force." Admiral Felt ruled in favor of central control of air support. He expressly said that he would allow no assignment of air power direct to the Vietnamese irregulars or to the U.S. Special Forces. Harkins next proposed to use Air America contract airlift for this purpose. In the end, a compromise was arranged. The Mohawks and Caribous disappeared from the proposal. With Defense Secretary McNamara's approval,

The team spent January 14-30 in Vietnam, soon after the battle at Ap Bac. The members examined the National Campaign Plan and endorsed the concept of "many small operations with decentralized control," undertaken "at an accelerated pace by each corps, division, and sector commander in his own area." They noted with approval that the tempo of small actions was quickening to 450 per month, and they looked for an upsurge in the future. The group was pleased with what appeared to be adequate coordination of political, economic, and military matters.[34]

Paying little attention to the battle of Ap Bac, the team heard General Harkins announce satisfaction with the air organization. His staff needed no stronger Air Force representation. The OV-1 Mohawks could do more than reconnaissance. Could they be armed with rockets? Could the rule prohibiting armed helicopters from returning fire except in self-defense be changed?[35]

The Joint Chiefs of Staff swiftly authorized U.S. Army helicopters "to engage clearly identified Viet Cong elements which are considered to be a threat to the safety of the helicopters and their passengers." Admiral Felt then permitted arming the Mohawks with 2.75-inch rockets.[36]

While the Wheeler team was sympathetic toward augmenting Air Force units, the civilian leadership in Washington was more concerned with turning the conflict over to the Vietnamese. On February 2 Hanoi called upon the International Control Commission to eject from Vietnam the USAF units that were "playing a key role" and causing widespread damage. Secretary of State Rusk was disturbed. He could hardly prevent American reporters from observing and writing about U.S. operations. However, he wanted the Embassy and MACV to release no information on American combat air actions. The United States, Rusk said, ought not to hand the communists an excuse to escalate hostilities.[37]

The U.S. newspapers publicized the authorization for American helicopters to fire on the enemy. Secretary McNamara refused to comment except to say that American military personnel were under instructions to fire their weapons only when their own safety was at stake. Secretary Rusk reiterated, "Our policy remains that the American role in Vietnam be strictly limited to advisory, logistic, and training functions."[38]

General Wheeler's assessment in January 1963 rang with optimism. The situation in Vietnam, Wheeler said, had been "reoriented, in the space of a year and a half, from a circumstance of near desperation to a condition where victory is now a hopeful prospect." A heartening sign was the steep rise in American advisory strength from nine hundred at the start of 1962 to more than three thousand. At first there had been no advisors with battalions, but now there were over four hundred. In a year the number of advisors helping province chiefs had grown from two to one hundred or more. Though "we have not given Ho Chi Minh any evidence that we are prepared to call him to account for helping keep the insurgency alive," Wheeler said, "we are winning slowly in the present thrust." There was "no compelling reason to change."[39]

Air Force officers on the team did not quite agree with General Wheeler's evaluation. They believed sizable and long-lasting U.S. help a must. The war

Infrared devices were meant to detect thermal radiation emitted by campfires, vehicles, structures, and traffic on trails and streams. In theory the sensors could pinpoint activities hidden from normal photography. But the Reconofax IV infrared photo equipment on the RB-26Ls broke down, and the technical representative in Vietnam could not make the system (originally designed for B-58s) work. Climatic conditions, chiefly dust and dampness, fouled the sensors. Heat from the photoflare cartridge ejectors forward of the infrared system saturated the infrared detector and ruined the film.

As for the RB-57E's infrared sensors, integral components were missing. The plane's panoramic cameras provided very clear horizon-to-horizon pictures even at high speed and low altitude. Having both horizons in the shot enhanced the perspective of the photo interpreter, but he had to learn how to compensate for distortion in the wide lateral coverage.[11]

When equipment worked, the intelligence apparatus was often unable to exploit the information gathered. The zonal concept of ground operations worked against a centralized air reconnaissance network. Separating intelligence data by corps tactical zone was not easy because planes flew across corps boundaries. Moreover, there were no courier aircraft to deliver reconnaissance film rapidly throughout Vietnam before the coming of two U-3s from the United States in May. Army OV-1 Mohawks attached to Vietnamese ground divisions reacted quickly to shifting situations. However, the intelligence they collected was not fed into the national intelligence-reconnaissance setup. General Harkins still labeled the Mohawks as "complementary" rather than "competitive" to USAF and Vietnamese tactical air reconnaissance. He saw no need to coordinate them with the standard activities, saying they were "outside the specialized capabilities of other photo aircraft."[12]

Air Force planes flew nearly all the reconnaissance in 1963, yet the flights failed to glean a great deal of intelligence. By reason of weather, jungle, and forested terrain, finding and photographing the small and fleeting enemy targets was a stiff proposition.[13]

Air defense radar control centers were situated at Tan Son Nhut, Da Nang, and Pleiku. These and the radar at Ubon, Thailand, gave high-altitude surveillance. The interceptor fleet consisted of Air Force F-102 and Navy EA-1F (AD-5Q) all-weather fighters rotated to Saigon. Mountain screening cluttered radar coverage below 5,000 feet. The F-102s performed marginally in low-level interceptions, while the EA-1Fs lacked the speed to intercept aircraft intruding in areas distant from Saigon. To stretch the coverage and especially to scan much of south-central Vietnam, the Vietnamese Air Force moved a TPS-1/-10D training radar from Tan Son Nhut to Ban Me Thuot in February 1963.[14]

From February 10 to 15 an unusual number of low-level, slow-flying radar tracks appeared before midnight near Pleiku and Da Nang then disappeared before dawn. Air Force and Navy interceptors investigated, using flares and other techniques. They found nothing, the tracks vanishing from ground and air radars as the planes approached. Around Da Nang on February 14, a Navy

totaled about ten thousand men, assisted by an air support operations center. The three days of preliminary interdiction generated thirty-six A-1H, fourteen T-28, and thirty-four B-26 sorties. Throughout the month-long operation, pilots flew 115 A-1H, 108 T-28, and seventy-four B-26 sorties. Besides killing five Viet Cong, these timely and potent air strikes destroyed 238 structures and damaged 77. The badly scattered enemy would need several months to return and reestablish Viet Cong Region 5 which, like the old Interzone V, guarded infiltration routes to base areas.[35]

Air Force and Vietnamese pilots faithfully followed the rule that air strikes had to be handled by a Vietnamese forward air controller. Although the procedure precluded armed reconnaissance aircraft from attacking targets of opportunity, it was a sound precaution against indiscriminate bombing. Crews staging to and from forward airfields were encouraged to fly low and seek out the enemy. Before they could attack, however, they needed an airborne forward air controller. Army OV-1 crews enjoyed less stringent rules of engagement. They frequently flew as low as fifty feet, enticing the Viet Cong to open fire so they could shoot back.[36]

Lt. Col. David S. Mellish, III Corps air liaison officer, secured authority in September to start an air interdiction program. Vietnamese province chiefs certified certain areas free of friendly people. The air operations center scheduled air strikes under forward air controllers into these regions. Provincial officials reviewed each target belt weekly.

This interdiction paid off in Tay Ninh and Phuoc Thanh Provinces during October, though the Viet Cong learned to disperse and take cover as soon as the L-19 dropped smoke grenades to mark targets for the strike planes. Mellish persistently urged armed reconnaissance in wholly Viet Cong sections. "Vietnamese pilots," he said, "should sweep these areas and shoot VC on sight. At present, we are ineffective because our politically inspired target-marking is the best possible air raid warning the VC could hope to have."

Col. Donald H. Ross, 2d Air Division director of operations, reminded his associates that the Vietnamese — not the Americans — were waging the war. Forward air controllers were vital to protect friendly people.[37]

Carefully targeted and controlled interdiction strikes on Viet Cong base camps, assembly areas, and logistic installations were designed to help ground troops clear and hold Vietnam. But the overriding air mission was support, preparation and cover for heliborne landings, night hamlet defense, and escort for convoys and trains.[38]

Over the first half of 1963, Vietnamese L-19s usually escorted truck convoys and trains but strike aircraft covered those transporting high-priority cargoes. Vietnamese and USAF planes flew close to one thousand sorties in these missions. The Viet Cong ambushed no surface movement having air cover, yet were quick to pounce on motor columns and trains wanting aerial escort.[39]

Developed from original Farm Gate tactics, night flare/strike missions in defense of outposts and hamlets under attack remained effective. One Vietnamese C-47 flareship stayed on night ground alert at Pleiku, a second stood similar

duty at Da Nang, and a third flew airborne alert every night over III and IV Corps. Yet the commander of the 514th Fighter Squadron refused to accept orders for A-1H night-strike crews alerted at Bien Hoa and Pleiku. He argued that his pilots were not ready to fly at night, but yielded to American pressure and accepted about half of the missions requested. Fighters working with a flareship could commonly dispense with a forward air controller during strikes in defense of an installation. However, for close air support of friendly troops under attack at night, a controller was required to mark targets.

Success of flare/strike defensive missions depended upon the speed with which those under attack could report to an air support operations center. By May 1963 most villages had radios, and the time lapse between attack and report averaged about forty-eight minutes. The delay stemmed chiefly from the short ranges of the provincial radio transmitters that demanded retransmission of messages, often at district, sector, and division levels. Viet Cong attacks on hamlets and outposts from January through April were few, and an average of thirty-three C-47 sorties was flown each month. The enemy customarily broke off an attack when a flare plane came on the scene.[40]

In the far northern I Corps, the 1st and 2d Divisions controlled the coastal plain to the mountains. The Viet Cong owned the mountains aside from Special Forces camps along the Laotian border and in the A Shau Valley corridor toward Da Nang. In mid-January 1963 the U.S. Marine Corps helicopter squadron HMM-162 became operational at Da Nang, with staging areas at Hue and at a point midway between Da Nang and Quang Ngai. This unit's H-34s supported the border outposts with resupply and troop-exchange missions that normally needed no strike aircraft support. But air mobile troops assault operations took careful advance planning for fighter escort, landing-zone preparation, and air cover. In these operations the H-34s flew in three-ship elements, one minute apart, en route to the landing zone. The helicopter commanders ran the whole affair, calling for strike aircraft to neutralize enemy fire. Even though the Marine Corps helicopter commanders evaluated the Vietnamese A-1H pilots as "outstanding," they favored USAF fighters because there was no communications language problem. When a platoon of Army UH-1 helicopters at Da Nang was attainable in April, these gunships protected landing zones.

The I Corps commander had to approve all requests for air strikes. Members of 2d Air Division who visited the air operations center there had the impression that U.S. Army advisors dominated the scene. For example, the advisors funneled many air support requests to the two armed OV-1 Mohawks stationed at Da Nang.[41]

In the II Corps eight USAF B-26s joined the four Vietnamese A-1Hs at Pleiku. At once air support sorties rose, probably because Vietnamese ground officers could see the aircraft on hand. But communications with the division command posts at Qui Nhon and Quang Ngai were regularly unreliable. And bad weather in the moutains east and northeast of Pleiku repeatedly impeded flights to the coastal provinces.[42]

Since photo reconnaissance could not capture rapidly shifting guerrilla operations, interest in other air reconnaissance techniques quickened. Airborne radio direction finding held promise, and the Army's 3d Radio Research Unit operated three assorted aircraft. These planes furnished important intelligence of the Viet Cong order of battle, but they could not make precise-enough fixes of enemy radio transmitters to permit air targeting.

In the United States the Air Force tested a C-47 (later an EC-47) that could plot the location of a ten-watt radio transmitter within one degree at a range of twenty-five nautical miles. In January 1964 PACAF requested seven C-47s fitted with more sensitive and accurate radio direction finders. However, the Air Force delayed approval until the experimental plane could be tested in Vietnam. Conducted during February-June 1964, the tests showed the tactical advantage of equipment that gave lines of position to an enemy transmitter regardless of the aircraft's heading. The plane could fly past a transmitter without revealing interest in it, whereas Army gear required a series of head bearings on the transmitter. Yet as the testing bore out, the C-47 direction finder was not sufficiently sensitive to plot the very low-power, short-range radios used by the insurgents.[37]

A better way to pinpoint enemy actions seemed to be infrared reconnaissance sensors. In mid-1964, while two USAF RB-57s waited for tactical work, MACV requested two Army infrared-equipped OV-1Cs to help carry out visual and photographic night surveillance. General Moore asked why the Mohawks were needed when the RB-57s were there. MACV was surprised that an infrared capability was already on hand, but proceeded to justify a requirement for four OV-1Cs. These were to feature side-looking airborne radar and infrared sensors that could be "read out" in flight. The two RB-57s had older infrared sets, requiring film to be developed and interpreted on the ground after the mission. In December the Air Force provided two extra RB-57s with inflight infrared readout. The older RB-57s were retrofitted with newer equipment and returned to service.

Word of the Mohawks authorized to MACV reached General LeMay. He wanted them put under the operational control of the 2d Air Division as part of a joint counterinsurgency reconnaissance task force. General Moore hoped to get authority to coordinate all infrared reconnaissance for MACV, but General Westmoreland favored a quite different control arrangement.[38]

In mid-1964 USAF air liaison officers and forward air controllers easily observed Viet Cong activity. Their liaison planes flew over enemy-held areas during the day and even more at night, when the guerrillas kindled fires to cook their food. The infrared sensor aircraft had the mission of collecting heat-radiating intelligence. Experimental night flights of the RB-57s produced infrared photos with "hot spots." These, when correlated with ground intelligence, confirmed the positions of Viet Cong camps in Zones C and D. The infrared section of the 13th Reconnaissance Technical Squadron processed the results of each night's infrared mission. From October 1964 on, enemy locations (usually the coordinates of the cooking-fire sites) were phoned at once to the

corps tactical operations center. After collation with other intelligence, infrared material was useful for artillery and air strikes.[39]

While the RB-57s were in test during July, 29 infrared targets were requested and 21 were completed. With one more RB-57 in use in December, there were 261 requests for infrared and 228 executed. Most infrared coverage was in the III Corps. To exploit both visual and infrared sightings, the 2d Air Division proposed target centers for the other corps.[40]

These centers were to funnel information and needs to the air operations center, which would coordinate strike aircraft. On December 20, 1964, however, MACV formed the Central Target Analysis and Research Center at Tan Son Nhut as a unit of MACV J-2 (Intelligence). Its main mission was to coordinate Army and Air Force infrared reconnaissance. The center set up units at the corps headquarters, and they were responsive to MACV J-2. Flights by RB-57s and OV-1Cs proved invaluable. By January 1965 the new setup was absorbing the entire infrared capability in Vietnam. In February there were so many requests for RF-101 coverage that the 13th Reconnaissance Technical Squadron was again unable to handle the processing load. Chiefly through correlation of infrared sensor indications with other intelligence, the center identified 250 possible enemy targets in two months. Included were Viet Cong battalion camps in Phuoc Tuy Province that would eventually be struck by B-57 jet bombers.[41]

Although the Air Force supported the MACV program to improve intelligence, the system removed control of infrared sorties and much of the RF-101 effort from the air operations center.[42] MACV enjoyed several intelligence sources that by law could not be disclosed to Vietnamese agencies. Consequently, the Vietnamese delayed and in some cases refused to allow strikes against targets so generated. The Central Target Analysis and Research Center worked at cross-purposes with the 2d Air Division's desire to develop close relations with province chiefs for intelligence and quick air targeting.[43]

Had the MACV system been staffed with more USAF targeting, interpretation, and reconnaissance officers, they might have produced more air strikes. But General Westmoreland regarded all air operations as support for ground troops and of necessity responsive to ground commanders. He even included interdiction, a normal USAF responsibility. Hence the MACV J-2 had the principal say on how air reconnaissance and surveillance resources were to be used. This left the 2d Air Division commander, working through the air operations center, with only nominal operational control over reconnaissance forces. These, like the aircraft flying close support and interdiction in South Vietnam, became chiefly geared to ground needs.[44]

So too the airlift. Although General LeMay preferred to have C-123 assault transports used in tactical operations rather than as logistic carriers, the insecure rail and road net imposed great stress on air. At times U.S. commanders joked that the Vietnamese army refused to travel on the ground and to keep roads and rails open because the Air Force moved everything for them. The adding of air escort for trains and convoys did little to restrain requests for air movements.[45]