

VIETNAM

366th Security Police Squadron, Đà Nẵng AB
DET 1/620th TCS, Korat RTAFB

"Pacific Stars and Stripes" Story SNAFU

by Terry Sandman,
Sgt USAF Security Police, 1966-1967
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Sky Spot 1967 and the "Pacific Stars and Stripes" Story SNAFU



Sky Spot Radar Stations were responsible for coordinating and directing B-52 Arc Light missions and fighter-bomber sorties against the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong units within a 200 mile radius of each radar station. One of those sites was located at the Korat RTAFB that was the northern most Air Force site in Vietnam. At only 6 miles south of the DMZ, Đông Hà Air Field was in a critical and needless to say very vulnerable location.

The North Vietnamese Army was heavily concentrated in the area with two divisions of troops supported by 140mm and 122mm rocket regiments, 130mm and 152mm artillery regiments, AAA and Surface to Air Missile (SAM SA-2) sites. All tolled the NVA had over 100 artillery guns dug into the DMZ. The main objective of the NVA was to over run Quang Tri Province. The Marines and NVA fought a series of very bloody battles within and just south of the DMZ starting in the spring of 1967. The Marines, along with some timely and massive B-52 and fighter-bomber air support, blocked the NVA from their objective.

The B-52s, directed by Sky Spot, bombed areas of NVA supplies and troop concentrations. More importantly to the Air Force personnel at the Korat RTAFB, the B-52's pounded with big bunker buster bombs the dug in, heavily camouflaged NVA 130mm and 152mm artillery positions in the DMZ which were pounding the Đông Hà Air Field area and other Marine bases at will. The B-52's hit the NVA positions both day and night. At Đông Hà Air Field the earth would shake from the impact of the bombs and at night the flashes from the B-52 strikes would ripple in the distance. Although the B-52 strikes raised havoc with the two divisions of NVA troops, the artillery, AAA and SAM sites weathered the bombing and remained just as deadly as ever.

In the Tuesday, March 21, 1967 edition of the Pacific Stars and Stripes, there appeared an article titled "FAC's Now Draw Bullets, Not Waves." The article went into some detail explaining that the weather conditions such as "thick overcast made low level bombing by fighter-bombers impossible." It detailed the FAC's (Forward Air Controller) role in the bombing mission and also gave some insight into the Sky Spot operations at the Đông Hà Air Field Air Base. The article explained that, "...a FAC pilot will spot a target of opportunity - trucks moving along a road for example. A quick radio message to the Aerial Command Post can lead to fast action. Back at Đông Hà Air Field the computers and radar equipment...click out vital information in a matter of minutes. Once the target is pinpointed, a plane already on station is diverted to make the strike with the aid of the FAC."

There was a drawing with the article showing the Đông Hà Air Field Sky Spot Radar Station in one lower corner and a FAC flying below the cloud cover observing the target and bomb drop. The FAC maintained communication with Sky Spot and a Phantom flying above the cloud cover that was releasing the bombs on target at the direction of Sky Spot. The teamwork involved in these efforts was considerable.

The article made very clear the critical role that both the FAC and the Sky Spot Radar Station played in completing a successful bombing mission. The Sky Spot Radar Stations performed a highly important function in directing B-52 and fighter-bomber missions on to their targets. Only a few miles south of the DMZ, the Sky Spot Radar Station at Đông Hà Air Field was extremely vulnerable to NVA stand off rocket and artillery attacks. The FACs, flying low and slow were vulnerable to ground fire.

As for enemy intelligence gathering, the drawing and story left no doubt as to what Sky Spot and the FAC missions were all about. Sky Spot performed such a highly important role that it's mission should have been classified "Top Secret" and not placed in a newspaper that was accessible to anyone, including the VC and NVA. At the time I thought to myself how could someone be so stupid or arrogant to approve releasing such a story.

The NVA began shelling the Marine bases located south of the DMZ in April 1967. The bases were Con Thien, Gio Linh, C-2, Cam Lo, the Rock Pile, units along the Cua Viet River and the Đông Hà Air Field Combat Base, which included the Air Force Compound. On July 3 of that year, NVA 130mm artillery rounds fired from the DMZ found their mark and the Sky Spot Radar Station was hit and valuable equipment destroyed. The trailer containing the radar equipment valued at \$1,000,000 took a direct hit. The radar personnel and Air Police Jerry McDaniel, were in a bunker when the rounds hit. No one was killed or injured at the radar site, but on another part of the Air Base, one airman was killed and several were wounded during the attack.

The valuable mission of the small airplane often seen flying overhead by the NVA and VC was made perfectly clear by the "Pacific Stars and Stripes" article. On May 22, 1967, an O - 1E Bird Dog piloted by Lt. Col. Lester Holmes was blown to bits and he was KIA by a North Vietnamese SAM SA-2 while he was on visual reconnaissance near the DMZ. That the SAM missile was bigger than the target that was shot down demonstrated the importance placed on the small, unarmed Bird Dog by the North Vietnamese.

I departed Đông Hà Air Field for Đà Nẵng Air Base on July 14, 1967 for my DEROS home. So I missed the even more devastating NVA artillery attacks that occurred in August and September of that year that severely damaged a Marine helicopter squadron on the ground and blew up the Marines ammo dump and fuel storage area at Đông Hà Air Field.

Sky Spot was a small site and it took some determined efforts by the NVA gunners to hit the compound. The Sky Spot radar site had valuable equipment destroyed twice within a few weeks in July by incoming NVA 130mm artillery. The vulnerability of the radar site to incoming artillery caused the Air Force to move it farther south and out of range of the NVA artillery. That also diminished the area covered in North Vietnam by the Sky Spot radar.

The FAC and Sky Spot story in the "Pacific Stars & Stripes" is a good example of the manner in which the war in Vietnam was sometimes managed and fought. Whether it was bravado or ineptness and with critical daily missions hanging in the balance, lives at stake and a war to be won or lost, too often our military and government allowed sensitive information to be released for consumption by friend and foe alike. The results were often devastating and deadly to our cause.

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Unarmed Spotter Planes

FACs Now Draw Bullets, Not Waves

By WALLACE BEENE

SAS Vietnam News Chief
DONG HA, Vietnam — "There was a time when the north Vietnamese used to wave at us from their trenches. Now they shoot."

So says Maj John D. Underwood, a forward air controller (FAC) who flies unarmed spotter planes over north Vietnam.

At first, the north Vietnamese just couldn't figure it out. Overhead would be a thick overcast that made low level attacks by fighter-bombers impossible.

Along would come a little spotter plane. Suddenly, bombs would come raining down out of the clouds on the unsuspecting enemy.

Underwood, Capt. Edwin H. Garver, commander of the Dong Ha SkySpot center, and several other officers came up with a plan that was both simple and complex: why couldn't a FAC pilot flying under the clouds direct a bombing attack from above?

Radar bombing is nothing new but there have always been problems when small targets are involved.

"Hitting a city is one thing, but going for a single file of troops along the side of a road is something else," Garver explained.

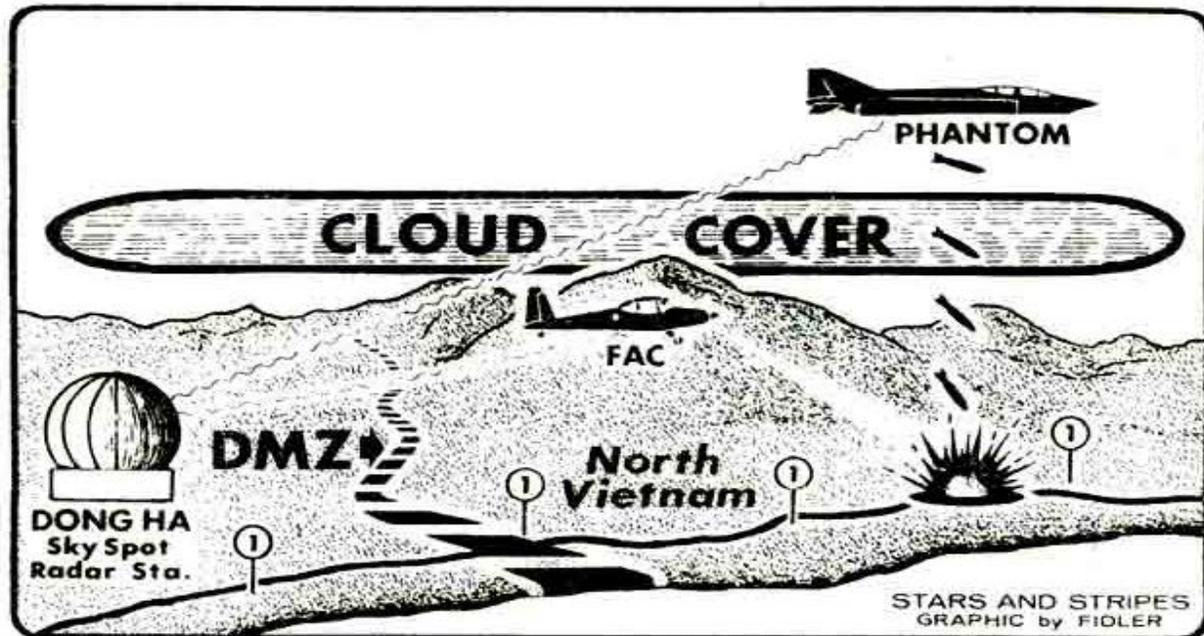
One big advantage in working with the FAC is that a spotter bomb can be dropped and corrections made before the "ripple" or "salvo."

"The best maps of north Vietnam are still questionable," Garver added. "Having the FAC eyeball the target makes a big difference."

When the Phantom or some other fighter-bomber lines up for its run thousands of feet above, the FAC calls the shot.

"We must fly parallel with the jet as close to the target as possible while SkySpot gives them the countdown and the signal to back (drop)," Underwood said.

"Another advantage is that the drop can be cancelled up to the last second," Garver said.



One benefit of the system that no one recognized at first was the added encouragement it would give the jet pilots to get the bombs on target.

Once the target is pinpointed a plane already on station is diverted to make the strike with the aid of the FAC.

Flying close to a target below the clouds when a string of 750-pound bombs is going to come ripping through requires good nerves and considerable confidence in the pilot above, but the FACs do it.

"I usually fly one or two clicks (kilometers) off the target path during the run," Underwood explained.

The attacks are not limited to a single plane — 12 or 15 may be sent if the target requires them.

Over the north, the FACs fly in teams for a very simple reason — "if one of us get shot at, the wingman can spot the guns — frequently multiple 50s — while the other tries tail and gets the hell out," Underwood added.

Instead of just making the drop over the clouds and hoping for the best, the pilots try extra hard when they know there is an observer down below," Garver explained. "They are also anxious to get a bomb damage report from the FAC pilot after the drop."

At times a FAC pilot will spot a target of opportunity — trucks moving along a road for example.

A quick radio message to the ACP (Aerial Command Post) can lead to fast action. Back at Dong Ha the computers and radio equipment supervised by controllers such as 1st Lt. Sam Hinson click out the vital information in a matter of minutes.

If the FACs get a good fix on the guns, bombs are likely to be raining down within 10 minutes.

Col. James H. Morrow, assistant director of combat operations for the 26th Tactical Fighter Wing at Da Nang, explained that

while the jet pilots prefer to make a visual attack, the technique of using FACs under the clouds is one way to beat the bad weather that blankets north Vietnam much of the year.

"Conventional weapons still cannot be placed with complete accuracy by radar alone," Morrow said. "This gives us added capability."

Or to put it another way, "Anything is better than sitting on the ground."

Farmer Crosses Up Viet Cong By Living Through Massacre

By SP5 GERARD FORKEN

S&S Staff Correspondent
CAN THO, Vietnam—His throat was slit. He had two chest wounds, his right foot was shattered, most of the blood was drained from his veins and Lam Van Sang wasn't expected to live.

Sang, a 55-year-old farmer, was one of 12 Vietnamese prisoners slashed by the Viet Cong as the communists fled advancing government troops in the Mekong Delta.

One of two prisoners to survive the latest VC atrocity, Sang was taken to Can Tho Provincial Hospital, where, after an emergency operation performed by Dr. Edward W. Green of Iowa City, Iowa, he was "returned from the dead."

Green, a member of the Volunteer Physicians for Vietnam (VP-VN), a 2-year-old program sponsored by the American Medical Assn., is a member of the Department of Surgery, University of Iowa.

He said that apart from the fact that Sang had lost a great deal of blood, the rest was simply a matter of "putting things back together."

Speaking through an interpreter Sang said he was captured while returning in his sampun from a fruit market and was taken to a large hut which was surrounded by barbed wire.

The Reds believed Sang to be a government spy and were careful not to speak in his presence. For most of his four-month imprisonment, he was chained by the wrists and ankles to 11 others. In all, there were 26 prisoners in the hut which was divided

Brando in Bangkok

BANGKOK (AP) — American movie actor Marlon Brando is in Thailand as part of his current world tour to raise funds to combat disease and poverty through contributions to the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). He arrived in Bangkok Friday from India.



Dr. Edward W. Green of Iowa City, Iowa, examines Lam Van Sang, one of two survivors of a VC bloodbath. (S&S)

into five sections. The prisoners included six women.

Sang said that they were normally fed twice a day with rice and salt. They also received boiled water. However, there were days when they got nothing.

When U.S. helicopters appeared over the prison camp, the prisoners were herded out of the hut into a long, narrow trench.

Sang said 12—still chained—were blindfolded and slashed with knives.

"I thought I must surely die," said the old farmer. "Then I heard the helicopters and I tried to break loose. But I was overcome by weakness and next I

knew I was lying in a hospital bed."

Before the communists fled, they machine-gunned their victims, one round shattering Sang's right foot.

Vo Van Hiep, 41, the only other member of the group to survive, was treated by Green for a 1 1/2-inch gash in the chest. He said he was taken prisoner 15 months ago because his brother worked for the government.

The government troops who overran the prison camp reported killing 17 enemy and capturing three detainees. There was no trace of the other 21 prisoners.

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