

A BRIEF HISTORY OF FORWARD AIR CONTROLLING



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The History of Forward Air Controlling

*******Before WWII.....by Charlie Pocock**

It is difficult to identify who first came up with the idea of airborne Forward Air Controllers (FACs), but in the U.S. military some credit must certainly go to Professor Thaddeus P. Lowe. In 1862 President Lincoln appointed Professor Lowe as the first Chief of the Air Service of the Union Army. Professor Lowe may better be remembered for his invention of refrigeration, but as part of the Union Army he pioneered four aviation concepts that remain valid today: 1) Airborne visual reconnaissance. 2) Airborne photographic reconnaissance. 3) Airborne artillery adjustment. 4) Communications relay. As much as the new art and science of photography aided Professor Lowe and his balloon corps, the invention of the telegraph also made it possible for the pilot of a tethered balloon to communicate his observations to people on the ground and in the most sophisticated cases talk directly to an artillery telegrapher.

The best-documented engagement demonstrating the effectiveness of the use of balloons in the U.S. Civil War was during the siege of Petersburg and Richmond. Both the Union and Confederate armies employed balloons and numerous aerial photos survive, depicting the positions of the opposing armies. In fact, any aerial photos of Civil War battlefields were taken from Union or Confederate Army Balloons. To say that being a balloon pilot was hazardous duty would be a gross understatement.

Balloons also saw limited service in the Spanish American War and the 1st Aero Squadron, equipped with JN-4 aircraft, was deployed to New Mexico during the Mexican Incursion. Both balloons and aircraft were used in various roles in WW I. Several other missions, such as air-to-air combat and tactical bombing were developed during the war, but visual and photographic reconnaissance, artillery adjustment and communications relay remained the cornerstone missions for the air corps of both sides.

*******World War II.....by Jim Gordon**

During World War II significant strides were made in defining the role of airpower in close support of ground forces. Forward air control concepts were tried with limited success by the South African Air Force as part of the Royal Air Force in the African campaigns but it wasn't until the war in Italy that the concepts of ground and airborne forward air controlling were well defined.

The Rover system was developed by the British and adopted by the Americans. A Rover unit consisted of an RAF controller, and an Army Air Liaison Officer, and VHF radio for aircraft communications. Their function was to apply air power to targets, often fleeting, close to the front line. A fundamental feature of the system was use of waves of strike aircraft, with pre-briefed assigned targets but they were required to orbit near the line of battle for

20 minutes, subject to Rover preemption and use against fleeting targets of higher priority or urgency. If the Rovers did not direct the fighter-bombers, the latter attacked their pre-briefed targets. U.S. commanders, impressed by the British at the Salerno landings, adapted their own doctrine to include many features of the British system. One important aspect of the Rover system was the willingness to use large numbers of tactical attack aircraft, which were only available after air supremacy had been achieved in the area.

The Rover system was complimented by the use of airborne Forward Air Controllers flying light aircraft (British Lysanders and USAAF L-5 Sentinels). These FACs used the collective call sign Horsefly. Success of the Horsefly operations was tempered by inadequate communications equipment and extreme vulnerability to hostile air-to-air action and Anti-Aircraft Artillery (AAA).

For the Normandy invasion each beachhead was assigned an LST with a combined Army and Air Force control element to coordinate Army requirements for close air support. Rover parties went ashore with all the ground forces. However, it wasn't until the fall of 1944 that Horsefly-type FACing became common. Increased resources and the full use of the expanded air-ground liaison teams produced a functional system of airborne FACs.

There are many stories of individual heroism by Forward Air Controllers in WW II but perhaps none is more impressive than the story about Captain James E. Parker. Captain Parker was in charge of the air support party that had been rushed to Bastogne on 18 December 1944. It was his job to integrate Close Air Support (CAS) into the fight throughout the siege. Captain Parker, a veteran fighter-bomber pilot with considerable experience in both the Pacific and European theaters, was also an experienced Forward Air Controller. Parker talked to flight leaders en route to Bastogne, gave them approach instructions, and helped them identify intended targets. P-47s came in low and fast, catching the Germans by surprise. On more than one occasion, ground troops received CAS within fifteen minutes of requesting an air strike. Enemy flak was heavy and elusive, with German batteries apparently moving from position to position around the Bastogne perimeter. On 28-29 December, Captain Parker coordinated a series of combined arms air-artillery attacks that finally silenced the threat and enabled the American Army to break the siege.

At the conclusion of WWII the US seems to have forgotten many of the hard lessons of WWII and in their haste to demobilize disbanded the airborne Forward Air Controller concept and relegated it to a ground based system using radio equipped jeeps. This is where the system was at the beginning of the Korean War.

******* The War in Korea.....by Jerry Allen**

The Mosquitos were the airborne and ground controllers of Close Air Support during the Korean War. They were the pilots and observers who flew unarmed T-6 trainers over the front lines, seeking out enemy positions and

guiding fighter-bombers in CAS strikes. They were the Tactical Air Control Parties (TACP) who lived on the front lines and teamed with the T-6s in the CAS mission. They were the support people who surmounted the hardships of equipment shortages and primitive facilities, keeping the T-6s in the air and the TACPs on the front lines.

The Mosquitos were born when U.S. and South Korean army units retreated before an enemy vastly superior in numbers and armament. They began as a small Air Force squadron, but grew into a multi-service and multi-national group as men from the U.S. Army and United Nations armies worldwide joined their ranks to fly as observers in the T-6s. The organization was infused throughout with an unsurpassed esprit de corps and camaraderie as men fulfilled their often hazardous and always critical duties.



T-6D "Mosquito" and TACP Jeep. USAF Museum Photo

Prophets of doom received a credible hearing with their predictions that full scale military and political disaster was at hand: A communist aggressor would push the U.S. Army into the sea and swallow South Korea whole. This disaster scenario did not play out, due largely to the success of air power with interdiction and Close Air Support.

When the Korean War began, military doctrine regarded Close Air Support as an important element in the firepower available to ground forces. Units in contact with the enemy could call on fighter-bombers to neutralize enemy strong points, destroy vehicles and eliminate troop concentrations. However to assure effective use of ordnance and prevent accidental striking of friendly forces, a controller had to be in sight of the target area, in radio contact with the fighter-bombers and had to continuously monitor and direct this firepower. This responsibility was assigned to an Air Force unit call a Tactical Air Control Party.

A TACP consisted of a pilot who was given the title of Forward Air Controller, an airman radio operator and an airman radio mechanic. Their equipment consisted of a VRC-1 jeep, which had radio equipment compatible with the radios in the fighter-bombers. Eight TACPs were available in Japan at

the outbreak of the war. These were deployed rapidly in support of South Korean ground units, thus giving them the distinction of being the first U.S. and UN combat units to enter the war.

In theory a TACP seemed an ideal arrangement; an Air Force team on the ground directing air strikes by fighter-bombers. However, the Korean battle situation soon revealed serious flaws. Since the FAC had to be able to see the target area to control the strike, many targets were not engaged because the primitive Korean roads made rapid movement between sectors of the front impossible. When roads existed at all they rarely reached good observation points. TACPs that persevered and gained good observation position frequently became targets themselves because their radio jeep could be seen by the enemy. Remote control equipment, which would have allowed the TACP to conceal their radio jeep a safer distance away from their observation point, was not available until later in the war. Further, some TACPs, moving between sectors, were ambushed or cutoff by the rapidly moving enemy and were forced to destroy their equipment and regain friendly lines on foot. Some were killed, reported missing or taken prisoner.

The need to augment the existing system was apparent and so was the solution: a controller who could move rapidly over the battlefield was an airborne controller. The Air Force began looking for aircraft and methods to implement this approach. The first attempts to provide an airborne controller were through the use of L-5s and other liaison-type aircraft. These aircraft were found to be unsuitable because of their vulnerability to air attack and their inadequate radio equipment. The faster, more rugged and more available T-6 was tried and scored an immediate success. Just a few weeks after the outbreak of the war, 5thAF scraped together aircraft, pilots and support personnel from its own meager resources and formed a provisional air control squadron, giving it the designation of 6147th Tactical Control Squadron (Airborne).

The T-6s of the 6147th were in place continuously in their assigned areas, for up to three hours a flight, always searching for and locating targets on the reverse slopes of hills beyond the view of friendly troops. During a strike they were able to see all of the target area and correct the aim of the fighter-bombers. They were able to move easily between sectors of the front and were ready to respond to a radio call from a TACP. The Air Force gave the T-6s the descriptive prefix of 'Mosquito' to their radio call signs, an appropriate name which caught on and was soon applied officially to the infant squadron and the airborne controllers.

Success brought more aircraft, men and the expansion from a squadron into the 6147th Tactical Control Group. The group reached its peak when it grew to include the 6148th and 6149th Tactical Control Squadrons, the 6147th Air Base Squadron, the 6147th Maintenance and Supply Squadron and the 6147th Medical Squadron. The TACPs which had been assigned to various other Air Force units came aboard as the 6150th Tactical Control Squadron. FACs, formerly drawn from the ranks of fighter-bomber pilots, were then drawn from

the ranks of Mosquito pilots who had completed the first 20 of their 100 Mosquito missions.

Continuous improvements were made in equipment. Target marking capability was added with 12 smoke rockets suspended under the wings. Radio equipment was upgraded to provide 12 VHF channels. An SCR-300, the Army "Walkie-Talkie," was put on board to enable the Mosquitos to contact ground units directly. The TACP radio jeeps were upgraded to the new VRC-3s. The Mosquitos in the air and the TACPs on the ground made an efficient team. The TACPs could now co-locate with regimental and division command posts and relay information on possible targets for the Mosquito pilot to investigate. They could relay information from the Mosquito reconnaissance to battlefield commanders, who came to depend on and trust this intelligence.

The success of the Mosquitos came with a cost in casualties. Fifty men were killed in action. Sixteen were reported missing in action and are presumed dead. Thirty-one became prisoners of war, 12 of which died or were killed in prison. Approximately one-third of the Mosquito casualties were TACP members. Most of these occurred immediately after the Communist Chinese intervention and during the battles of the Chosin Reservoir and the Chongchon River. In a single day in one corps area, five of the seven T-6s which entered the area were struck by enemy fire. One T-6 was hit and repaired so many times it was given the name of "Patches."

*******The War in Southeast Asia.....by Charlie Pcock**

Following the defeat of France and the signing of the 1955 Peace Accords, French Indo-China was divided into four independent countries; North and South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. North Vietnam, with Chinese backing, had vowed to reunite Vietnam by taking over South Vietnam. South Vietnam asked for and received U.S. military assistance to assist with defense. U.S. military assistance included everything from rifles to airplanes and military advisors. As the war escalated the U.S. Army established a series of advisory teams at the Corps and Province levels. These also included U.S. Special Forces who established camps along the Laotian border to train local indigenous personnel. On 16 November 1961 Detachment 2 Alpha, Jungle Jim, deployed to Bien Hoa AB, Vietnam with obsolete T-28, B-26 and C-47 aircraft. By 1962 there were 16,000 U.S. troops in South Vietnam and the USAF began sending larger numbers of advisors as well as TDY combat units, such as the 3rd Tactical Fighter Wing from Clark AB in the Philippines. Forward Air Controllers were also assigned on a TDY basis from U.S. bases in Japan. In mid 1962 the first 10 PCS FACs arrived. Air Force Advisory teams were eventually established down to Province level.

In the beginning all FACs were assigned directly to the 2nd Air Division which later became the 7th Air Force. On 17 June 1963 the 19th Tactical Air Support Squadron (TASS) was re-activated at Bien Hoa AB and became part of the 504th Tactical Air Support Group (TASG). The 504th also included ground

based radars. In late 1965 the FACs were organized into four squadrons aligned with the four Army of Vietnam (ARVN) Corps areas. The 20th TASS in the northern or I Corps area, the 21st TASS in the II Corps area, the 19th TASS in the III Corps area and the 22nd TASS in the southern IV Corps area. Shortly thereafter the 23rd TASS was added in Thailand with the mission of interdicting the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos. To aid in the battles in Laos, a group later called the Ravens was created in 1967 as a separate organization reporting through the Laotian Air Attaché and Ambassador directly to 7th Air Force. The radio operators, who were part of the TACPs, were now called ROMADs (Radio Operators Mechanic And Driver) and remained assigned to the new 505th TACG along with the radar sites.

The war lasted for 14 years. It spread from Vietnam to Laos and finally to Cambodia. The final chapter ended with the capture and eventual battle over the merchant ship Mayaguez in May of 1975. During this longest war in U.S. history the Forward Air Controllers acquitted themselves well and expanded their mission envelope to include search and rescue of downed pilots as well as reconnaissance and controlling air and artillery strikes against the enemy.



Vietnam Era slow FAC aircraft: OV-10, O-1 and O-2

This was the first war the U.S. had ever fought where there was no “front line” and where civilians may be friends or enemies. The war was different in other ways as well. There were U.S. Army units, Army of Vietnam units, U.N. units, Sector units, and interdiction areas which all required FACs, many with different requirements and skills. Initially, the Cessna O-1, first produced for the Army and Marine Corps, was used but by 1967 attrition was taking its course and the Cessna O-2 was introduced followed quickly in 1968 by the North American OV-10. The OV-10 had more of everything: speed, armor, armament, and was soon modified for use with smart bombs. But it also required a more sophisticated support system. Another innovation was the night vision scope which allowed for O-2 night time reconnaissance and air strikes.

The role of the Forward Air Controller remained virtually the same as it had been in Italy during WWII. Fighter pilots would be briefed on a pre-

planned target and after takeoff they would contact either a ground or airborne radar site for vectors to their target. Meantime, the Direct Air Support Center (DASC) maintained contact with FACs working in that particular area. If a FAC had an “immediate” target of fleeting or higher priority he could re-direct the fighters to his “immediate” target. If no target change was made the FAC would direct the fighters to their pre-planned target. Thus it was incumbent on the FAC to be aware of the situation on the ground, the location of friendly forces and their needs, AAA threats and how best to attack the target. Very few attack aircraft were sent home with any ordnance.

Unlike previous conflicts, the jungle terrain dictated that over 95 percent of the air strikes were controlled by airborne FACs. Air strikes usually not controlled by airborne FACs included B-52 strikes and Army and Air Force gunship strikes. As might be expected there were also several special projects which required specialized and daring skills such as the Special Forces Road Watch teams in Laos and other Long Range Recon Teams and Project Sigma. During the incursion into Cambodia, French speaking interpreters were recruited from throughout the Air Force to accompany the Rustic FACs as they carried the war to the enemy.

FAC manning was often a problem: First priority was U.S. Army units; Second priority was interdiction and special projects; Third priority was support of friendly foreign forces; Last priority was the Sector TACPs and FACs. Until the U.S. forces were withdrawn, the FAC squadrons were never manned at authorized strength and it was not unusual for a sector (province or county) TACP to be authorized five FACs and have two assigned. Throughout the Vietnam War all pilots received training at Hurlburt AFB, Florida, or one of three training facilities in Vietnam. Depending on which airplane was involved, the training lasted from 2 to 12 weeks.

For high threat areas, jet fighters were used as FAC platforms. The Misty FACs, flying two-seat F-100Fs and commanded by Major Bud Day (MOH), operated over North Vietnam and northern Laos from 1967 to 1970 and were followed by others. A-1 Fireflies, F-4 Wolves, Stormys, Tigers, Falcon/Atlanta (Laredo/Bullwhip) teams and the Night Owls operated over northern Laos. FAC duty was one of the most hazardous; the Mistys loss ratio of 4.37 aircraft per 1,000 sorties was far higher than any other type of duty.



F-100F "Misty" FAC

The C-123 Lamplighters provided flare drops and nighttime Forward Air Control duties in less hazardous areas. But the bulk of the FAC missions were flown by O-1s, O-2s and OV-10s; in fact these aircraft flew half of the total sorties and hours logged by all USAF aircraft in the Southeast Asia wars.

Following withdrawal of U.S. forces from SEA, some of the FAC assets were assigned to other areas such as Korea and Europe. In a rather ironic twist of fate, the Butterfly FACs were cross trained Combat Air Controllers scheduled for duty with the CIA in Laos until the Commander 7th Air Force learned that enlisted men were controlling jet fighters and put a stop to this effort, giving birth to the Ravens. In more recent times this effort was revisited and the enlisted FACs are now called Enlisted Terminal Air Controllers (ETACs).

During Operation Urgent Fury in Granada ground based FACs and ETACs were airdropped with the Army Rangers. During Operation Just Cause in Panama, A-37s, based at Howard AB, Panama, were used as FACs.

*******The Present and Future.....by Charlie Heidal**



A-10 and radio jeep. Photo courtesy of Charlie Heidal

At the close of the Cold War the remaining OV-10 aircraft were given to the governments of the Philippines and Colombia for use in their wars of counter-insurgency. The airborne FAC role was transferred to the A-10s, some of which adopted the call-signs of their former Southeast Asia FAC brethren. The O-2s were either mothballed or sold at public auction and the O-1s were transferred back to the Army. Except for those on public displays and in museums, the aircraft of the Southeast Asia FACs are no more.

The ROMAD (Radio Operator, Maintainer, And Driver) was an enlisted radio maintenance man assigned to U.S. Air Force TACP attached to U.S. Army Battalions, Brigades, and Divisions (also attached to some Australian, Korean, and Vietnamese units in Vietnam). He worked with FACs

and ALOs, requested tactical air support, operated and maintained a Mobile Radio Communications jeep or radio pallet. This became an official Air Force career field in April 1977 as Tactical Air Command and Control Specialist (TACCS), but ROMAD always stuck as a nickname for several good reasons. The ROMAD acronym was changed to Recon, Observe, Mark And Destroy.

ROMADs were formally trained at Keesler AFB, Mississippi, and Hurlburt Field, Florida, in the skills they needed at TACPs. However, those skills did not include controlling air strikes. Committing weapons was still felt to be within the purview of an Air Force officer. It was a doctrinal issue not a skill deficiency. Many ROMADs had controlled air strikes with or without the over-the-shoulder supervision of a FAC or ALO and they had done it well. But sometimes it takes reality and logic a long time to catch up. To this day ROMADs are assigned to Airborne and Ranger units as well as Armor and Infantry units.

The logic of having ROMADs control air strikes from the ground seemed clear. ROMADs could do the job. Being a ROMAD was at least a four-year commitment if not a career while being a FAC was an assignment not a career. And obviously, the Air Force had invested a lot of money in training pilots so FACs belonged in an airplane not a radio jeep. However, the tradition was still entrenched in the doctrinal issue of who was allowed to clear the dropping of ordinance, and several years would pass before ROMADs were allowed to say those two words all ROMADs love: "Cleared hot."

When ROMADs finally became ground forward air controllers, the job came with yet another name: Enlisted Terminal Attack Controller (ETAC). An ETAC is allowed to control air strikes without supervision, and this authority is very important to the career field and to the role of ground tactical air support. This authority carries an implied acceptance of the capability of the men in that unique career field, and that acceptance was and is a real morale boost for the ROMADs. In a short time ETACs would be controlling air strikes in "Desert Shield" and "Desert Storm" assisting and complimenting the airborne FACs flying A-10s. And they did well.

September 11, 2001 changed many things. Out of the roiling dust and smoke of the fallen towers came a realization that life in America may never be the same as before, a national resolve that terrorism would not be a permanent part of that new life, and a new way of waging war. While the politics of conflict are debated in the safety and comfort of congressional and town halls, young men and women must go out on the dangerous and brutal fields of conflicts and lay their lives on the dark red line of war. From Kabul to Baghdad, those young men and women perform well and display remarkable courage and intelligence. They have, as have their past brothers and sisters in arms, brought honor to this great country they defend. And at the far edge of that dark red line, you will find the TACPs and ETACs. It is where they want to be.



Laser Target Designator

With advancements in targeting, communications and weapon delivery systems, it now means that even if you can't see the target but just know where it is you can strike it in the daytime or at night in good weather and bad. With addition of the Day and Night Photography, Laser and Television Guided Bombs, Satellite Communication systems, the Global Positioning System and the use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, any trained person with the right equipment can strike a target. This has given rise to still another name change. Joint Terminal Attack Controllers, or JTACs, draw on the resources from all branches of the U.S. military and foreign nations to perform the Forward Air Control mission. With the tools available today and given a two week course of instruction, the best and brightest can effectively conduct an air strike.

To be sure Air Force Tactical Air Control Parties are still attached to U.S. Army units both overseas and in training here at home and they will go forth with their assigned units into battle. And Air Force pilots are still being trained as Forward Air Controllers.

Today in Iraq and Afghanistan and in any future conflict JTACs are and will be performing the Forward Air Control mission with imagination, dexterity and skill. If there ever have been any doubts that the FAC mission has been placed in competent and ready hands, rest assured. With the dedication and the affection the JTACs bring to this largely unknown yet extremely important job, it is in good hands.



USAF ETAC Bart Decker riding to the sound of battle in Afghanistan

South East Asia Facts*

FAC Facts:

Number of FAC Medal of Honor Recipients: 3 (Day, Willbanks, Bennett)
Number of FAC Air Force Cross Recipients: 26
Number of Slow FACs KIA: 223
Number of Misty FACs KIA: 8
Number of Enlisted Support staff KIA: 53
Number of US Army personnel supporting FAC Mission: KIA: 15
Number of US Marines supporting the FAC mission: KIA: 4
Number of Vietnamese AF Supporting the FAC Mission KIA: 2
Number of O-1's lost: 173, Combat losses 123 = 71% combat loss rate
Number of O-2's lost: 104, Combat losses 82 = 78% combat loss rate
Number of OV-10's lost: 63, Combat losses 47 = 74% combat loss rate
Number of F-100F's lost: 20, Combat Losses 20 = 100% combat loss rate
Number of O-1 pilots KIA: 114
Number of O-2 pilots KIA: 72
Number of OV-10 pilots KIA: 37
Number of slow FACs KIA in other planes: 6 (T-28, F-100, AU-23, C-130, U-10)
Percentage of all slow FAC KIAs killed in O-1: 51.1%
Percentage of all slow FAC KIAs killed in O-2: 32.3%
Percentage of all slow FAC KIAs killed in OV-10's: 16.6%
Percentage of all slow FAC KIAs killed in other aircraft: .3%
Total number of slow FAC mid air collision fatalities: 15
Total number of slow FAC Unknown losses: 57
Total number of slow FAC aircraft accidents: 57
Slow FACS that became General Officers: 96 (10 Full Generals)
Misty FACs that became General Officers: 7 (2 AF Chiefs of Staff)
Slow FACs from Australia: 36; Slow FACs from New Zealand: 14

SEA Conflict Facts:

Personnel that served in the SEA Theater: 3,403,100
Deaths from Hostile Action: 47,359. Wounded and hospitalized: 153,329.
Missing In Action: 2,338
POWs: 766, of which 114 died in captivity
The fall of Saigon happened 30 April 1975, two years AFTER the American military left Vietnam. The last American troops departed in their entirety 29 March 1973.

* FAC/SEA Facts have come from various sources, some verified some not

