

FORWARD

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Red Markers were a part of the earliest efforts to establish a serious Air Force presence in Southeast Asia, an effort that quickly evolved into the use and control of Tactical Air Power. In this environment, the Forward Air Controller played a critical role. The first FACs and Air Liaison Officers came from fighter squadrons and probably had three months temporary duty with Army units, training as ground FACs in simulated close air support missions after attending the Air-Ground Operations School. They were familiar with most forms of ordnance, its delivery and results.

Early on, high-level thinking was that the Air Force was not really needed in Southeast Asia in a combat role. The Air Force strongly disagreed, and, in 1962, began the first serious introduction into SEA of FACs and of advisors to Vietnamese fighter squadrons. The disagreement among the services about the Air Force role led to a turbulent beginning in inter-service cooperation. Initially, Air Force personnel were not allowed to live in Army facilities, the only ones available. In many cases the ALO/FAC had to tell his Army counterpart that he did not work for him and remained under Air Force control.

Fortunately, this confusion and awkwardness soon changed in the course of operations where each side earned the respect of the other with courage, dedication and professional performance under live fire in combat. In fact, many close friendships were formed in the brotherhood that battle produces.

Working with the Vietnamese Airborne was a unique experience. The Airborne had very high unit esprit, which was reflected in the conduct of their operations. Red Markers equaled this standard of conduct in an environment that was completely new and strange to them. Red Markers operated from remote locations, in many cases using small, unimproved landing strips. On occasion, they made a landing strip from a wide spot in the road. They maintained a complete inventory of field equipment associated more with an Army than an Air Force unit—tents for living quarters and a command post, runway night lighting, a generator, mobile radios, cots, air mattresses and sleeping bags along with tables and chairs, rations and ammo. All of this was necessary to accompany the Airborne on deployments which on short notice could be sent anywhere in the country.

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Many times a Red Marker was in an isolated location where all manner of situations developed. There was no one to help him. He made his own decisions, planned his own course of action and gained the aura of self-confidence that became a trademark of the Red Markers.

Early on, night FAC missions were done without flares. The control of an air strike at night with troops in contact, without flares, is the granddaddy of all FAC missions. In my view, it is the FAC's most demanding mission. On occasion, recovery after a mission was required in total darkness using only the headlights of a couple of jeeps to help the pilot find the landing strip.

Although Red Markers assigned with the highly mobile Airborne missed some of the comforts enjoyed by FACs with American units or with other ARVN forces, such as rooms with beds, dining facilities and other FACs for company, we had some good moments. The last FAC mission of the day might end with a landing at the closest facility to load the empty back seat with cases of coke and beer for a quick flight back to the remote location. This particularly endeared us to the Army advisors with whom we worked.

The Airborne celebrated its anniversary with a variety of ceremonies. One such ceremony was to place a ten-foot square platform in the Saigon River in front of the Majestic Hotel in downtown Saigon and use this as a target for sky-divers. I was asked to participate in the practice

parachute jump before the actual ceremony. In the jump, I was the first out and laughingly named myself the "Wind Dummy" after I missed the platform and landed in the river.

The Red Markers were highly decorated for their service and their courage by both the Vietnamese and American governments. There were numerous awards of Vietnamese Crosses of Gallantry, some with palms and gold stars, and one award of the VNAF's Air Gallantry Cross with Silver Wings. There was one award of the highest Vietnamese medal, the National Order of Vietnam Knight. In addition to uncountable Air Medals, the American medals included many Bronze Stars and Distinguished Flying Crosses, plus a few Bronze Stars with V, numerous Air Force Commendation Medals, an Army Commendation Medal with V, an Army Air Medal with V and several Silver Stars. The highest US award earned by a Red Marker was the Air Force Cross presented to Captain Delbert W. Fleener for extraordinary heroism in action on 17 December 1965. The Red Markers were some of the finest people I have ever served with.

In closing, I cannot accept the fact that we lost the war, or that our country reneged on its pledge to a people, or that our leaving caused millions of Asian deaths. The Red Markers fought and died for a different outcome.

Gene McCutchan
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Red Marker 62-63, 65-67