

Night Flight: “Nighthawks” of VMA (AW)-533 in Vietnam

BACKGROUND

Many will read this, but only a few of us had the privilege and unique experience of flying combat missions at night in an A-6A Intruder in Vietnam. The chosen few who did were land-based at Da Nang or Chu Lai or later in the war at the “Rose Garden” in Nam Phong, Thailand, while others were carrier-based in the South China Sea.

This snapshot is for those who might wonder about these aviators who fought and died in the night skies over Vietnam – many who never came home. Duty, honor and courage abounded in the A-6A night attacks against North Vietnam. Those who survived and still walk among us will never forget their experience, and many of their stories have yet to be told - - their contributions and sacrifice are a splendid saga awaiting a historian.

PRELUDE

What follows is derived from a memory faded with time. While this is merely a glimpse of a small group in a short time frame, the outcome affected the Marine Corps All-Weather Attack community until the A-6 aircraft were retired in 1995.

This particular squadron of aircraft and personnel started its work-up for Vietnam during 1966 at Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Cherry Point, North Carolina. Most of the personnel were trained in/on the A-6A at Oceana Naval Air Station in Virginia. The Navy developed and

provided the initial training of the first aircrews and maintenance personnel for this Marine Corps squadron. Many later aircrews were trained by this nucleus of Marines in the squadron.

This squadron and its all-weather Intruders were sorely needed in Vietnam to supplement our sister squadron VMA (AW)-242, already in at Da Nang, and the carrier-based squadrons in the Gulf of Tonkin. In fact, VMA (AW)-533 almost became the first carrier-based Marine A-6 squadron, but it was decided that neither the time nor resources were available for a carrier work-up period. So our land-based training continued with a work-up deployment to MCAS Yuma, Arizona. There we conducted intense live-bombing training missions both day and night during the late fall of 1966.

This was followed by Christmas and New Year's holiday leave periods back at Cherry Point. One officer took a bride that holiday; another became engaged and later married while on R&R. Sadly, both brave, new husbands (Pat Murray and Val Bacik) were later lost in the night combat skies over North Vietnam.

On 21 March 1967, VMA (AW)-533 departed Cherry Point for Vietnam. We refueled over Oklahoma on our first leg to MCAS El Toro. We then refueled over the Pacific Ocean enroute to MCAS Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii; from there we flew to Wake Island; then to Agana Naval Air Station in Guam; onto Cubi Point Naval Air Station in Subic Bay in the Philippines. At each of these one- or two- day stopovers, the aircraft were maintained while the aircrew rested for the final leg to Chu Lai, South Vietnam. This squadron Transpac of aircraft and personnel was on of the most successful during the entire war. The squadron arrived in Chu Lai on April Fool's Day, 1967.

CHU LAI, SOUTH VIETNAM

Chu Lai had been the objective of a successful, but contested Marine Corps amphibious assault in 1965. An expeditionary airfield had quickly been employed and Marine Aircraft Group 12 (MAG-12) was soon flying its squadrons of A-4 Skyhawks in close air support for the Marine infantry in I Corps. MAG-13 deployed there later with squadrons of F-4 Phantoms. When VMA (AW)-533 arrived and started flying missions in April of 1967, the expeditionary airfield was being heavily utilized by MAG-12, while MAG-13 was operating the newly finished concrete runway system.

VMA (AW)-522 occupied the new hangar and aircraft parapets at the south end of the runway with its attendant support equipment and work areas. The living areas were about three miles away – closer to the beach. Except for the sophisticated electronic equipment repair shops, none of our work or living areas was air-conditioned. Though the dust, heat, rain and humidity were stifling, one soon became acclimated and endures the climatic conditions of the region. We were shuttled to and from work. Flushing lavatories and modern plumbing with hot and cold running water did not exist. One thing you learn in the Marine Corps is innovation. Our hygiene was excellent. Most of us did our laundry in large ammo cans filled with water and soap, stepping with our feet and squishing with our toes until we could toss out the dirty water. Then we

repeated the process with clean water for the rinse cycle. Needless to say, anything white soon became very beige.

One enterprising young pilot guided us in building a hot water shower for our company grade officer's area that became the only luxury we had. Unfortunately, during the monsoon season, the sun could not heat the overhead storage tank enough to keep the water hot. A cold water shower and shave was better than none.

Toilets were strategically placed in our living and work areas. They were normally two-holers set over a 55-gallon fuel drum cut in half. They were not lit and woe be unto he who did not use a flashlight. They were sanitized daily.

We lived in cabins with plywood floors and wall. The walls were hinged and could be raised up for air circulation. The roofs were sheets of tin that were noisy in the rain and acted like solar panels in the sun. There were four to six officers in each hut. We slept on cots and stored most of our stuff in a foot or wall locker. There was normally enough generated electricity for a small light bulb or two, Next to our hut was a dugout, reinforced bunker to take shelter in during a mortar attack. In time, a sun deck was constructed for our common area.

MAG-12 had three club/dining areas; one for enlisted, one for noncommissioned, and one for commissioned officers. Three meals were served daily, but milk, peanut butter, jelly and bread were always available as a snack. The club usually had a movie to show each evening and the bar was open. The USO often provided entertainment. Bob Hope brought his troupe to Chu Lai at Christmas. There was a multi-denominational chapel; various services were held daily. The medical and dental clinics provided outstanding care. The squadron flight surgeon was always there and kept us flight-worthy. There was

also a small Post Exchange and barbershop. Our hair was kept in the traditional way: high and tight.

Chu Lai was a small, self-sustaining base that was resupplied from the sea and the air. It was a dynamic environment with a full 24-hour a day operating tempo. Our flight crews quickly adjusted; their sleep was mostly done in the daylight hours due to the nighttime flight schedule. The base was always subject to sapper or mortar attacks; our pistols were always loaded. This was a very noisy home for our 13-month tour.

ALL-WEATHER FLIGHT

VMA (AW)-533 arrived at Chu Lai with 12 A-6A aircraft, 15 flight crews, and our maintenance and administrative/logistical support personnel, all totaling about 300 men. The squadron quickly adapted to the 24-hour day

routine. Enough cannot be said about our enlisted personnel and staff noncommissioned officers and warrant officers. They were loyal, courageous, and focused. They worked tirelessly; without their dedication and support, little would have been accomplished. Those who flew nightly will always be grateful to those who ensured our aircraft were safe and ready for flight.

Initially the squadron was tasked to fly 12 sorties each night, 8 into North Vietnam and 4 over the DMZ area. Later, as more experience was gained and more pressure was put on North Vietnam, the squadron was tasked daily with 16 sorties, 12 attacks into North Vietnam each night and 4 daytime close air support for our Marine infantry. The aircraft were normally loaded with 18 or 28 500-pound bombs depending on the target. Occasionally, they were loaded with five 2000-pound bombs.

The target areas were hot, hotter, and hottest – ranging from just south of the DMZ to the Hanoi-Haiphong areas and north of the Red River in North Vietnam. We flew four sorties each night into Route Package VI, which was north of the Red River, and four sorties nightly into Route Packages III, IV and V, mostly around Vinh and the southern complexes of Hanoi and Haiphong. Then, four sorties went into Route Packages I and II just north of the DMZ, and the other four sorties went in just south of the DMZ during daylight hours. It was a rare flight that did not receive ground fire. Most of the target areas were heavily defended with SAM sites and 37, 57, and 85mm radar-controlled guns. MIGs were a threat, but mostly only during daylight hours.

One target assigned to our squadron that was successfully attacked was the Hanoi Railroad and Highway Bridge known as the Paul Doumer Bridge. This site was defended as follows: 13 active SAM sites; four nautical mile radius=188 37/57mm guns, 121 85mm guns; eight nautical mile radius=455 37/57mm guns, 300 85mmguns. Anticipated Reaction: Heavy 37/57/85 mm-radar controlled fire and SAMS.

The crew that conducted the attack on the Paul Doumer Bridge flew from Chu Lai and descended to 300 feet just south of Haiphong, then to the bridge above the Red River at full military power. The aircraft was fully engulfed by ground fire over a 21-mile track to and from the bridge and an intense crossfire covered the bridge as they approached. The pilot flew through the crossfire as the aircraft deposited 18 500# mine-fused bombs in the river below the bridge. Numerous SAM warnings from the target area lit up the cockpit and chattered through their headsets throughout the attack. The aircraft quickly climbed as the bombs dropped off, increasing their vulnerability, but the pilot quickly commenced his turn to the east (120 degrees) while dropping back to 300 feet. The egress turn took the aircraft over the Hanoi airport and

they were soon feet wet over the Gulf of Tonkin just south of Haiphong enroute to Chu Lai. The two EA-6A radar-jamming support aircraft reported this was the most intense ground fire they had ever witnessed. They flew just out of SAM range and above the ground fire each night – supporting the attacks in Route Packages III, IV, V, and VI.

The targets attacked each night by the A-6A Intruders, whether from the carriers or Da Nang and Chu Lai, were all similarly defended and attacked from low levels. The SAM sites were best evaded by flying low and this also gave the aircraft less exposure to the guns.

During the 1967 Rolling Thunder period, the North Vietnamese, with their Russian support, defended their country with as heavy air defenses as any our country had ever faced in combat. Many A-6A aircraft were lost to these defenses during the war, and the daylight attacks by our brethren Air Force and Navy aircrews incurred grievous losses.

VMA (AW)-533 lost its first crew in August 1967. Of the original 15 crews, only one pilot and two B/Ns did not survive the 13-month tour. Only one was found and brought home for burial. Another original crewmember was killed in North Vietnam on a subsequent carrier-based tour in the Gulf of Tonkin: in 1989, he was interred at the U.S. Air Force Academy where he graduated.

As the months wore on, the squadron was flying its 16 sorties with about 12 crews. Our squadron at Chu Lai never rotated out of country like the A-4 and F-4 squadrons did. So there were usually always two crews on R&R. It was very common to fly into North Vietnam twice a night. All of the pilots and B/.Ns had more than 250 missions into North Vietnam. At that time the Air Force pilots flew 100 missions into North

Vietnam and their tour was completed. Likewise the carriers normally did a three month combat tour in the Gulf of Tonkin and then withdrew.

The squadron never had a stand down, nor was it shut down due to the monsoon. There were many days and nights when the Intruders were the only planes in the air. Only after midnight Christmas Eve 1967 were we not in the air for a 24-hour period. This was the first, last and only time we all had together as members of VMA (AW)-533 since we departed Cherry Point in March 1967.

EPILOGUE

Meanwhile, back at Cherry Point, new A-6A squadrons were being formed and the need for combat-experienced pilots and B/Ns to staff these squadrons was a high priority. Members of our sister squadron VMA (AW)-242, had completed their 13-month tour and most of them were assigned training roles. The training requirement back at Cherry Point resulted in fewer crews going home early starting in January 1968.

This was a remarkable squadron. The squadron commander retired as a three-star general [Lieutenant General William "Bill" H. Fitch]. Seven Marines rose to the rank of Colonel. All of those who stayed in were rewarded with a second tour in Vietnam. Those who went back to the civilian world rose to the top of their chosen profession. Several are lawyers and airline captains who are now approaching their retirement. Lastly, it was indeed an honor and privilege to have known and served with this special group of pilots and B/Ns who gave so much and asked for so little. They were truly magnificent in their courage and unselfish devotion to Duty, Honor and Country.

By Colonel Donnal "Hoot" Hiltbrunner, USMC (Ret)

Night Flight: “Nighthawks” of VMA (AW)-533 in Vietnam 1967 – Continued

“The Skinny” from Colonel Mike “Bones” Burns

The tough Rolling Thunder targets came from the LBJ Restricted Target List in October 1967. Be careful what you wish for. Our loss rates went up as we started hitting bridges, airfields, Radio Hanoi, etc.

The USAF dropped the Doumer Bridge that day (27 Oct). We went in that night, and our mission was to seed the Red River around the bridge with MK-36 Destructor Mines – 500 pounders with special fuses. Our Dash 2 could not get his ordnance to release, so the mines were jettisoned into the river while still on their MERs. The ordnance officer, “Boom Boom” Chesnick, got an earful upon return to Da Nang. The reason why Donn “Hoot” Hiltbrunner and Bill “KMar” Kretzschmar came to Da Nang the next morning was to get bombs with the special fuses because Chu Lai had none.

Donn said most of us were still drunk – not me, however. I had scope photography of the attack, and Donn took a look at it. No B/N in the world can miss the Paul Doumer Bridge on radar when flying at 250 feet AGL inbound. This became a pop-up mission for VMA (AW)-533 due to our Dash 2 not getting his armed mines into the river at the bridge. That scope photo showed up in newspapers in the US, and I have a copy somewhere, if I can find it.

Bill “KMar” Kretzschmar, the author of the poem, was Donn Hiltbrunner’s pilot that night. The 1st MAW Wing Commander met us when we shut down the birds that night. We delivered the first Marine bombs on Hanoi, if memory serves.

We lost Hugh Fanning and Steve Kott a few nights later going after the Canal des Rapides Bridge five miles northeast of Hanoi. In November, we lost our “Skipper”, Lou Abrams, and Bob Holdeman. They were going after the Kien An airfield at Haiphong. Then VMA (AW)-533 lost Hobart Wallace and Pat Murray in January of ’68 going after Vinh Yen, 20 miles northwest of Hanoi. Jerry Marvel and Larry Friese of 533 were shot down and captured in February of ’68 going after the Hoa Lac airfield 17 miles west of Hanoi. Daylight strikes in Route Package VI around Hanoi in late 1967 were very costly. The Air Force and Navy lost the following number of aircraft on these dates: 24 October - 4; 25 October - 3; 26 October - 3 (John McCain became a POW on this day); 27 October - 4; 28th October – 16 November - 14; 17 November - 4; 18 November - 4; 19 November - 6. Well, you get the idea. [We lost] some 42 aircraft in this 27-day period, and this does not include the losses in other Route Packages and down south. Did I mention, “Be careful what you wish for?”

In general they put our -242 and -533 crews in for the Navy Cross. Most got Silver Stars. One got a Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC). The Fanning and Kott crew were not put in for any awards. Go figure? It was a good solid DFC hop to be sure.

The Navy lost 59 Intruders and the Marines lost 25 in the Southeast Asia War Games, with 89 KIA and 52 POW. It was a heck of a way to fight a war, but we were winning when I left.

Rolling Thunder started the 2nd of March 1965 with two pinprick strikes near the DMZ. It was gradual escalation, followed by periodic

bombing halts for the next three years, while we waited for North Vietnam to come to the table. The F-105 Thud drivers had to get 100

missions “North” for a complete tour. Their saying was, “By your 66th mission, you will have been shot down twice, and picked up once.” The

Thuds lost 275 aircraft in the North and 397 total (half of their entire inventory). Overall, one “Yankee Air Pirate” was being lost for every 40 sorties.

There were 1,158 AAA sites with 5,795 guns covering the North in 1967-1968. 68% of all losses were due to guns. About 5,000 SAMs were fired over the North. You could only attack a SAM site if it shot at you. The Navy spotted 111 SAMs on railroad cars near Hanoi, but could not bomb them. They had to fight all 111 of them one-at-a-time later.

Hanoi and Haiphong had “Prohibited Zones” around them, with “Restricted Zones” extending even farther out. The merchant ships in Haiphong Harbor remained off limits for the entire war, although they were bringing in war supplies for the enemy.

Targets, sorties, and even tactics that were to be allowed, were made at a Tuesday luncheon in the White House, with no military personnel allowed in the room. This did not change until late in 1967. To quote LBJ, “I won’t let those Air Force generals bomb the smallest outhouse without checking with me.”

On 31 March 1968, we quit bombing north of the 19th parallel. On 1 November 1968, we quit bombing the North entirely. Rolling Thunder’s three year campaign had not been built to succeed, and it didn’t. That’s my story, and I’m sticking to it!

