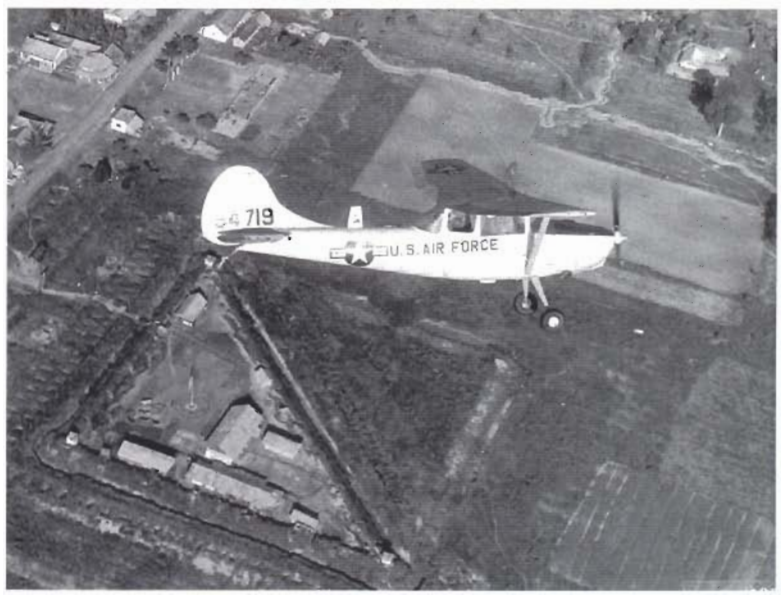
USAFA's Forward Air Controller Heritage

By Col. (Ret.) Jimmie H. Butler, '63



On November 13, 2007, the remains of Maj. John L. Carroll, '62, were returned for burial at the Academy Cemetery. Major Carroll was a Forward Air Controller—a Raven FAC—shot down 35 years ago in the Secret War over Laos. He is part of a little-known—but significant—piece of the combat heritage established by early Academy grads during the Vietnam War.

At a recent Falcon Heritage Forum, I learned—as I expected—that few cadets had ever heard of Forward Air Controllers, known more commonly as FACs. After all, for today's classes the Vietnam War is on the edge of ancient history much as World War I was to the cadets of the late 50s-early 60s. Now lasers guide bombs onto targets, often assisted by intelligence gathered using Unmanned Aerial Vehicles tens of thousands of feet above the theater and interpreted by men and women thousands of miles away at Nellis AFB, Nev. Four decades ago those jobs were done by several thousand USAF pilots/navigators

flying "down and dirty" over the mountains, jungles, and rice fields of Southeast Asia.

We started in Cessna O-1 Bird Dogs, a 1950-vintage single-engine tail-dragger, having much more in common with the rickety aircraft of World War I than with combat aircraft in the 21st Century Air Force. Patrolling daily over all of South Vietnam, over the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos, and into the fringes of North Vietnam, FACs were the hunters. Bird Dogs operated off 10,000 foot concrete runways; shorter runways made of perforated steel planks (PSP), which were slick as ice when wet—and it rained a lot in SEA; from dirt strips in direct support of ground forces; and from the main streets of a few small villages. (One Bird Dog reportedly was taken out by a Vespa motor scooter, whose rider had ignored the temporary barrier at one end of the makeshift runway.)

As years passed, Cessna O-2 Skymasters and North American OV-10 Broncos took over most FAC missions. The FAC theaters of operations expanded into Northern Laos and all over Cambodia, with FACs covering some areas 24/7. It is said that FACs flew nearly half of the USAF's combat sorties in SEA.

While almost every cadet in the first few years of the Academy wanted to be a fighter pilot, you'll never meet one who will say he wanted to go to Undergraduate Pilot Training to become a FAC. Yet for many of us, our FAC tour(s) were the most satisfying flying experiences in our careers. We logged many mundane flying hours droning along in a Cessna while searching the jungles below. Nevertheless, while over the enemy areas, we always knew extreme danger could be lurking only a few breaths ahead.

Being a Forward Air Controller meant being what the rather unimposing name says—we were in control over forward areas of battle. Often the lives of hundreds of "friendlies" on the ground depended on our judgment and our split-second decisions. Even as a first lieutenant, being a FAC meant you shouldered great responsibility for whether the day's battle would be won or lost. General William Momyer, who commanded 7th AF out of Saigon in the 1960s said: "At all times the FAC was the final air authority on whether or not the strike would continue. He was, in fact, the local air commander for the conduct of all air operations, and his authority was recognized by the ground commander and the flight leader alike."

Being a FAC meant collectively being in the middle of most of the air action over South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. While controlling airstrikes, FACs literally were in the middle, often holding over the target while jets coming off their attack runs screamed by at maybe 500 knots and a few hundred feet away.

The Forward Air Controller

By Retired Army Maj. John J. Duffy

It is the lonely mission,
The Forward Air Controller.
His are the eyes above the battle.
His is the link to those below.
While others avoid and strike fast,
He lingers and trolls for contact,
Seeking out the enemy below,
Determining the strike force needed.
His is the job to control the air attack.
He determines the needs of the troops,
And works the airstrike margins.
His judgment is relied upon by all.
Watching a "FAC" roll in hot on target,
All guns blazing at his destruction,
Is to watch a man of courage in action.
This is the daily job of the "FAC."

Previous page, top: An air-to-air view of an OV-10 Bronco aircraft firing a White phosphorus smoke rocket to mark a ground target. (USAF Photo by Bill Thompson) Bottom: A Forward Air Controller O1-E "Bird Dog" aircraft is shown here in reconnaissance role near a Special Forces Camp in the Republic of Vietnam. (USAF Photo) Top Right: Side view of a U.S. Air Force O-2 of the 9th Special Operations Squadron dropping Chieu Hoi leaflets over the Republic of Vietnam in July 1970. (USAF Photo by William F. Diebold)

Often when someone was shot down, Crown (the airborne rescue command post) designated a FAC as the initial on-scene rescue commander until the Sandies (A-1 rescue escorts) reached the location.

Probably the most personally satisfying role for FACs involved direct air support to American and allied ground forces in South Vietnam and to Special Ops troops on clandestine missions into Laos and Cambodia. The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army troops routinely tried to ambush friendly forces under conditions that favored the attackers. Thousands of times, Americans needed help in a hurry. In some cases, nearby helicopter gunships would race to the scene. The FACs, however, were the difference makers who could quickly evaluate the battlefield and call in the heavy iron and fire from the air.

Distinguished Service Medal recipient retired Army Major John J. Duffy served four combat tours, including Special Operations on the ground and later flying with FACs to help with combat extractions of Special Forces Teams behind enemy lines. Duffy has many personal insights into the importance of FACS. In his recent poem, "Forward Air Controller Requiem," he characterizes FACs in the following way:

"When everyone was calling "Help!",
They were the ones to help.
The emergency number in the sky,
The guardian angel to many of us."

Duffy's accompanying poem, "The Forward Air Controller," describes the life of the FAC in combat more succinctly than most of us who flew the mission could.

The reviewer of a book about Forward Air Controllers observed that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C., would have had to be much larger if not for the Forward Air Controllers. During the Colorado Springs Veterans Day Parade on Nov. 10, 2007, a man stepped out from the crowd as the parade entry from the Forward Air Controller Association approached. He wanted us to be able to hear him shout, "I'm alive because of you guys."

And they are out there still today by the thousands. Being a FAC meant routinely putting your life on the line to help save others. We truly experienced the joy of victory—and the agony of defeat when rescue attempts failed.

Approximately 250 FACs lost their lives in Southeast Asia. This list of Air Force heroes included 29 USAFA graduates from ten classes from 1959 through 1971. Their causes of death reflect a cross-section of the dangers that all FACs faced. Eighteen USAFA grads were shot down by weapons ranging from small arms/automatic weapons, through 37mm anti-aircraft artillery, up to an SA-7. Two disappeared in bad weather. One crashed on takeoff. One died during a ground attack. Four died in mid-air collisions with an AC-47, an A-7, a Chinook helicopter, and another FAC. One was lost in a training accident.

Six of the 29 died while flying as members of the legendary Ravens, men who locked away their uniforms and Air Force identification papers to fly as FACs from small airfields in Laos in the secret war. Two Ravens were killed on the ground after successfully parachuting or crash landing. The North Vietnamese didn't take many prisoners in Laos. No details were available on four of the Ravens who were lost in Laos.

On Jan. 2, 1966, Capt. Harlow K. Halbower, '59, was the first member of the first Academy class to die in combat in Southeast Asia. First Lieutenant Mark A. Peterson, '71, (promoted to Captain while MIA), and Capt. George W. Morris, Jr., diverted for a Search and Rescue mission for another pilot. On Jan. 27, 1973 their OV-10 was downed by an SA-7, becoming the final Air Force combat loss in South Vietnam before the final cease-fire. On June 5, 1973 1Lt. Richard T. Gray, '71, was piloting the last OV-10 shot down in the war.

These 29 grads who gave their lives—and many others who survived their combat tours in the slow FAC aircraft—are highly decorated for the risks taken to accomplish difficult and dangerous missions. The nearly 30 FAC recipients of the Air Force Cross include Col. (Ret.) Donald D. Stevens, '60, Maj. John L. Carroll, '62, Lt. Col. (Ret.) Philip V. Maywald, '63, Col. (Ret.) Rowland H. Worrell, III, '68, and Capt. Joseph A. Personett, '69.

In addition to the Air Force Crosses, Air Force FACs were awarded two Medals of Honor (posthumously), many Silver Stars, hundreds of Distinguished Flying Crosses, and thousands of Air Medals.

In the tradition of Forward Air Controllers from previous wars, FACs in Southeast Asia added a valorous chapter to the history of the U.S. Air Force. Early graduates who served as FACs in the Vietnam War indeed established a significant piece of the combat heritage of all cadets and graduates of the USAF Academy.

Editor's Note: Author, Jimmie Butler, '63, flew 240 FAC combat missions in O-1s and O-2s in 1967, mostly over the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos. He retired from the Air Force in 1987.

FAC Memorial to be dedicated in Memorial Park, Colorado Springs

On Oct. 2, 2008 a major event of the 2008 Forward Air Controller Reunion will be the dedication of a memorial honoring more than 250 FACs, crewmen, and support personnel who died in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War.

Each list of names on the two wings of the memorial will be headed up by the name of a recipient of the Medal of Honor. The names of 29 USAFA graduates will be on the memorial. Other engravings in bronze and granite will tell more of the little-known story of Forward Air Controllers who had a major combat role in the war and who saved the lives of many American soldiers and Marines in battles on the ground. Medal of Honor recipient Col. (Ret.) "Bud" Day has been invited to be the dedication speaker. The Misty "Fast FACs" will dedicate a Misty memorial as part of the overall FAC Memorial. Flybys by vintage FAC aircraft and F-16s of the Colorado Air National Guard are expected to be a part of a ceremony worthy of the American heroes honored.

The Forward Air Controller Association invites everyone who wants to pay tribute to these men to join in the dedication ceremony. Information about the 2008 FAC Memorial and the Reunion is available online at www.fac-assoc.org/ColoradoSprings.htm.