

While considering what I was going to speak about today, I thought I should touch on how those associated with the Forward Air Controller mission in Southeast Asia might be remembered. As a point of reference, I would invite you, if you never have, to one day visit the Korean War Veteran's Memorial in Washington. There you will see 19 seven-foot tall statues cast from stainless steel and depicting warriors on a combat patrol. Each of the Services from the Korean War are represented by those statues and one of them differs from the rest for, while all the others have their eyes fixed on the terrain around them as they advance, there is one warrior that has his eyes turned skyward, and that is the Forward Air Controller, the FAC.

That is one way to depict a FAC in support of combat forces, but I thought another way to consider how others might perceive those of us who served in the FAC mission would be to approach it as though one of our grandchildren had sat down with us and asked, "What did you do in the war, Grampa?" Most of us are of the age that we have heard such a question and I understand Frank Arnold was asked that very question this summer by his great-granddaughter when she was home from college! But, enough about Frank Arnold's age.

In keeping with the Air Force's guidance to keep all briefings to three main points, I decided there are three ways the answer to such a question posed by a grandchild. They are: how FACs were perceived by their peers; how they may be remembered by historians; and, finally, how we FACs viewed ourselves.

Beginning with a FAC's peers, I elected to look at what the FAC's crew chief, what his ROMAD (Radio-Operator-Maintainer & Driver) and, finally, what fighter pilots thought of "their" FAC.

First, let's consider the crew chiefs who worked under the broiling tropical sun or in monsoon rains, busting their knuckles while tightening a loose bolt or straining their back while changing a tire. After making their airplane "Code 1" some jaunty fellow in a flight suit with a bag full of maps and a pair of binoculars would show up and take a perfectly good aircraft and disappear to who knows where only to return several hours later with a candidate for the scrap heap. No matter what condition it was in at takeoff, a FAC's airplane was invariably returned with no gas, and everything that could be either dropped or shot from it was gone. The canopy had grease-pencil hieroglyphics scribbled all over it, a panel or two was either loose or missing and, at best, the wings were no longer straight, while, at worst they were full of holes.

But, other than the FAC's immediate family, there was nobody as happy as the crew chief



when his FAC taxied in from his mission.

As for how the FAC viewed his Crew Chief, he knew his life depended on him and the blood, sweat and tears devoted to getting the airplane ready for combat. We FACs knew the airplane was the crew chief's hot rod and that they were allowing us take it out for a spin out of the goodness of their heart. But as much as we FACs wanted to care for that hot rod as though it were our own, the mission sometimes dictated otherwise. Regardless, the bond between a FAC and his crew chief was a tight one.

Now, let's turn to the ROMAD. For those who didn't know, FACs weren't always soaring above the battlefield in the crew chief's hot rod. Some FACs deployed with the Army in the field – meaning they were slogging through the mud with the soldiers on the ground while looking for the bad guys! To do this, the FAC rode in a jeep and, working alongside the FAC was his ROMAD, the Radio Operator, Maintainer and Driver for the jeep and its load of radios so vital to conducting the FAC mission. The poor ROMAD had to contend with FACs who were often John Wayne wannabes who constantly wanted to get in the midst of all the action, drive the jeep places where jeeps couldn't go, were fascinated by all the pretty lights, buttons and dials on the radios and, no matter how many times they were told it wasn't possible, wanted to call home using those very radios.

As for the FAC, he knew that the ROMAD driving and maintaining the jeep along with the radios it carried made it possible to keep up with the Army and conduct the mission of supporting them with airpower. The FAC also knew the radios and the jeep needed a ROMAD more than the FAC needed his M-16, .45 pistol and the bandoleer of ammo worn at all times. Bottom line, the FAC depended on his ROMAD and knew beyond a shadow of doubt that the ROMAD would follow him through the gates of hell, and often did just that. As with the crew chief, the bond here was similarly a strong one.

The final peer to consider is the fighter pilots the FAC directed to strike the targets he marked. Fighter pilots saw FACs as guys flying one of the slowest, unarmed winged things around the skies of Southeast Asia or else bouncing around in a jeep with the Army who were just another frustrated fighter pilot and regardless of the conditions, FACs always considered themselves IN CHARGE! The fighter pilot knew he would drop several tons of bombs from an airplane going a thousand miles per hour pointing straight down with enemy tracers scraping their canopy and manage to put every one of those bombs directly on the smoke the FAC had just directed them to hit. After all of that, they also knew he would probably hear a correction from the FAC that went something like, "OK lead, that was close, but I needed you to drop those bombs 5 feet to the west."

Whatever the fighter pilots thought of the FAC, they didn't envy them their job and certainly admired them for the way they conducted themselves in the heat of battle. Although a fighter pilot wouldn't trade places with a FAC, if they were shot down they knew a FAC was likely to direct any rescue effort!

The fighter pilot also knew the FAC likely envied their mission, but they understood as fighter

pilots that they were just high-velocity airborne carriers of high-explosives in desperate need of a FAC to tell them just where to drop their bombs before running out of gas.

Enough about the FAC's peers, let's consider what history might say about the FAC team. On Veteran's Day over a decade ago, I left a FAC Tribute at the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in Washington, DC. I did that to capture for history the role of FACs in Southeast Asia. Thanks to the effort of our own Bob Green, that tribute has been presented to FAC families who have seen their FAC fly west on their last mission. I use what I wrote then to tell you that history may record that we FACs were U.S. & Allied Airmen who principally flew small, slow-flying, lightly armed aircraft such as the O-1, the O-2, and the OV-10 throughout Southeast Asia from 1962-75. Serving alongside us were maintenance and munitions personnel who ensured that our airplanes were kept operational, fueled, and armed. Additionally, ROMADs maintained and helped operate our radios, performing those duties alongside FACs who deployed with ground forces in the field.

We FACs flew day and night at low altitude in every sort of weather, and also served in the field with U.S. ground forces. We probed targets, directed air strikes to support embattled U.S. and Allied ground units, interdicted enemy infiltration routes, and coordinated rescue operations for downed airmen. Using smoke rockets and smoke grenades to mark targets, we controlled air strikes, naval gunfire, and artillery fire against enemy positions. Fighter aircraft knew where to drop their weapons when they heard our trademark radio call directing them to:

“HIT MY SMOKE!”

We FACs were the eyes, the ears, and the voices (and sometimes the harmonica, thank you Charlie Yates) above the battlefield. We were gallant airmen who provided the vital link between troops in the field, the various command and control agencies, and U.S. and Allied warplanes.

Air Force FACs were in Air Commando Detachments, the 504th Tactical Air Support Group and the 19th, 20th, 21st, 22nd, and 23rd Tactical Air Support Squadrons. Marine FACs were in VMO-2, VMO-3, VMO-6, H&MS-11, H&MS-13, H&MS-16, and HML-367.

FACs became known by the individual radio call signs they used throughout SEA. Rarely did the plea for “Any FAC” go unanswered as FACs always flew to the sound of battle.

I used what our registrants for the reunion gave as their callsign to compose the following list, so I apologize if someone does not hear theirs in the following list. **Some** of the call signs used by FACs in SEA were:

Aladdin, Ascot, Barky, Baron, Bart, Bilk, Bird Dog, Boron, Bronco, Bully, Cagey, Chamba, Chico, Cider, Cobra, Compose, Cove, Covey, Covey Easy, Covey Tango, Cricket, Cutie, Dart, David, Elliott, Gombey, Hammer, Headhunter, Helix, Herb, Issue, Jade, Jake, Kenny, Laredo, Lopez, Mike, Misty, Nail, Nile, Owl, Playboy (what FAC would NOT want a callsign of Playboy?), Pretzel, Python, Quail, Ragged Scooper, Rake, Rash, Raven, Red Marker, Ringo, Rod, Rustic, Rustic

Alpha, Sidewinder, Sleepy Time, Slugger, Smokey, Snap, Snoopy, Spat, Speedy, Spike, Suds, Sundog, Tally Ho, Tamale, Tiger Hound, Tilly, Tonto, Toy, Trail, Tum (we probably could have used a few Tums after some of our missions), Viper, Walt, Wolf, X-Ray, and Zipgun.

Although a small portion of the Air Force effort in Southeast Asia, FACs comprised over 13% of the Air Force personnel killed in combat during the war. We will shortly hear a roll call of the names of those FACs who are among the fallen.

Included in that roll-call will be two FACs posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor, Captain Hilliard A. Wilbanks and Captain Steven L. Bennett.

As is said, "All Gave Some, Some Gave All". I submit that is how history should remember the FACs.

Now that we have seen how others considered the FAC, I want to look at how we viewed ourselves. To do that, I need to take us all back some 40 years to when the first FAC memorial was dedicated here at Hurlburt. It was a simple cement obelisk with individual nameplates for each of the fallen FACs. Unfortunately, it didn't weather very well and the FAC Association replaced it with this beautiful stone monument that salutes the FAC mission as well as our fallen comrades. When the old memorial was taken down, a call went out to see if anyone wanted to try and return to a family member the nameplates that had been on the memorial. I volunteered to do that for Dick Gray, the last FAC killed in SEA. Dick and I were high school classmates and I had been to his home many times. My task wasn't easy, I followed many false leads, but eventually found that Dick's older sister, Betty Jean, was the only remaining family member.

Through her alma mater, I discovered that BJ lived in Salt Lake City and I wrote her a letter, not knowing how it would be received. My worst fears were NOT realized, she couldn't have been more gracious. I met with her in Virginia and returned Dick's nameplate to her. For those who attended the 2006 reunion in Dayton you may recall that BJ joined us at the dedication of the FAC memorial at the National Museum of the Air Force.

In return for that nameplate, BJ gave me this small trinket Dick had picked up in Bolivia when he traveled there as a cadet at the Air Force Academy. BJ told me it is called a Chibcha and, after some more research, I found that the Chibcha people often depicted their deities in stone or wood carvings. Further, one of the deities in that region was called Catequil, the god of thunder and lightning. I don't know that this small trinket is Senor Catequil or not, but I'm going to run with it as any FAC could identify with the god of thunder and lightning.

As the FAC Association chaplain, you would be correct if you assumed I am hesitant to say any FAC was a god. However, I can say beyond a shadow of a doubt that some FACs may have believed they were god-like.

When you consider the Chibcha that I hold, it becomes almost believable that a FAC could be god-like and especially like a god of thunder and lightning. I say that because a fitting description of the FACs in Southeast Asia is that we rode the thunder into battle and we

