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The Fare Facs Gazette

The Newsletter of Historic Fairfax City, Inc.

Volume 16, Issue 3

Summer 2019

Ol' Walt

One Man's Journey from Ohio to Virginia, by Way of Vietnam

by William Page Johnson, II



In the summer of 1967 he was a young man, just 33 years old, tall and thin. At six feet, he barely fit into the cramped cockpit of his O-1E *Bird Dog*. He was already deeply tanned after several month's under the Vietnamese sun. He had been in the U.S. Air Force for thirteen years and had by then flown many different types of aircraft. But he loved the small, agile O-1E the most.

Larger, more sophisticated aircraft relied much more on instrumentation rather than the skill of a pilot. Although the O-1E was lighter and slower, it was more responsive. Flying low and slow, just several hundred feet above the Vietnamese jungle, he felt more in control. More connected. More vulnerable. More alive.

What follows is the untold story of a real unsung American hero. It is a story of service sacrifice, dedication, bravery, devotion and love.

John Wooden, the legendary basketball coach of the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) once said "Character is what a man does when no one is looking." That statement certainly defines my friend, Walter Joseph Potock, Jr., or simply, Walt, as he was known by many. A few other terms that come to mind when I think of Walt are modesty, humility and compassion.

As a *Forward Air Controller* (FAC) in Vietnam, Walt Potock flew over 200 combat missions. He amassed an impressive record. He often defied prescribed safety protocols, flying at night, or in bad weather, in support of American and Vietnamese ground forces who needed assistance.

I met Walt and Charlie¹ Potock more than twenty years ago when I first ran for public office. While campaigning, they invited



Virginia License Plate issued to Walt Potock c. 2003.

FAIRFAX FAST FACT:

Jemantown was once a thriving village of "mechanics," located on the western boundary of what is now the City of Fairfax. The settlement contained a half dozen houses and a blacksmith shop. That is until the advent of the Civil War.

On July 17, 1861, the eve of the First Battle of Manassas, Union troops advanced toward Manassas from Vienna (Jermantown Road) and Alexandria (Little River Turnpike) on converged on Jermantown. The Harrison House and several others were 'burned to the ground.'

Charleston Mercury, July 24, 1861, p. 1.
Madison Daily Patriot, July 29, 1861, p. 2.
West Jersey Press, July 31, 1861, p. 2.
Cincinnati Daily Enquirer, August 10, 1861, p. 1.
Charleston Courier, August 31, 1861, p. 1.
Charleston Courier, September 20, 1861, p. 1.

DUES ALERT

If you have not paid your annual Historic Fairfax City, Inc. dues they are now due. Please remit based on the schedule below. Annual dues payments should be made out and sent to: **Historic Fairfax City, Inc.**, 10209 Main Street, Fairfax, VA 22030.

Your annual dues help HFCI to continue to meet its basic goal of preserving the unique history of the City of Fairfax. Tax deductible donations over and above dues payments are encouraged.

At the Fairfax Museum and Historic Blenheim...

Fairfax Museum and Visitor Center

The Fairfax Story - Hamill Gallery. Permanent Fairfax history exhibition.

Gano Gallery

"Fairfax County's Original Set of Weights and Measures," through December 31, 2019 - See one of the oldest and most complete set of colonial weights and measures in the country on loan from the Alexandria Washington Masonic Lodge No. 22.

"Sewing on the Homefront: World War II Quilts " - preview May 12. Through October 20, 2019

See quilts American women made to honor U.S. soldiers and to benefit the war effort.

"Teetotalers and Moonshiners: Prohibition in Virginia, Distilled" • October 28 - December 8, 2019

A traveling exhibition from the Library of Virginia , "Teetotalers and Moonshiners" addresses the important and long-lasting effects of Prohibition on the Commonwealth and America.

"New Virginians, 1619-2019 and Beyond" - December 16-January 25, 2020

Fairfax Museum and Visitor Center "Second Sunday" Programs

Programs are held at **2 p.m.** on the second Sunday of each month. Unless otherwise noted, programs are held at the Fairfax Museum and Visitor Center, 10209 Main Street. Free (unless noted). Check back to find out about additional programs planned throughout the year. Information: **703-385-8414**.

Sunday August 11 - 2p.m.

***"A Public Airport for the District of Columbia":
The History of Washington Dulles International
Airport***

Learn about the airport's history and design from independent scholar Ray Clark PhD.

Sunday, September 8 - 2p.m.

"From Camp Humphreys to Fort Belvoir."

Historian and archaeologist Patrick O'Neill will present the story of how today's Fort Belvoir was transformed during World War II.

Sunday, October 13, 2018 - 2p.m.

"Gay Fairfax" - - Join historian John Olinger for the story of "Gay Fairfax," a pioneering newsmagazine television program and its legacy for LGBTQ civil rights in Northern Virginia.

Sunday, November 10 - 2 p.m.

"Goodbye Booze": The Music of Prohibition

Dr. Gregg D. Kimball, Director of Public Services and Outreach at the Library of Virginia, will trace the musical legacy of prohibition through spoken narrative, period images, and live and recorded music. Feel free to sing along!

Sunday, December 8 - 2p.m.

"Prohibition in Washington, D.C.: How Dry We Weren't"

Author and tour guide Garrett Peck will explore how prohibition impacted our capital city. Book sale and signing will follow the talk.

**Civil War Interpretive Center at Historic
Blenheim**

PERMANENT EXHIBITION

"Blenheim's Civil War Soldier Signatures: A Diary on Walls". Explores the local Fairfax Court House history and the experiences of soldiers who wrote on the walls of the Willcoxon home (Historic Blenheim.) The replica attic is a life-sized replica of the house attic that shows the clearest graffiti in the house.

Historic Blenheim Civil War Interpretive Center Program Series Programs are free and held at 2 p.m. on Saturdays (unless otherwise noted) at the Civil War Interpretive Center at Historic Blenheim, 3610 Old Lee Highway. Information: 703-591-0560.

Saturday, August 24 - 2 p.m.

"Col. George Sharpe and the Creation of the Bureau of Military information in 1863"

Lecturer Jim Anderson will tell the story of how the story of how Sharpe went about creating the Bureau of Military Intelligence and formulating professional intelligence practices. It also will assess the impact of the BMI on the military campaigns that led to the battles of Chancellorsville and Gettysburg.

Sunday, September 28, 2019 - 2 p.m.

"Victorian-Era Photography: Cameras and the Magic Lantern Show" -- Local photographer Phillip Foss will bring a selection of Victorian-era cameras and discuss their usage with his present-day photography of historic and local sites. He will also present a Magic Lantern show. ***"The Consummate Citizen-Soldier: Charles Russell Lowell, Jr."***

Sunday, October 26, 2019 - 2 p.m.

"The Nameless and Faceless of the Civil War." Author Lisa Samia will read from her collection of 28 poems and 28 essays on the historical representations of Civil War events and everyday soldiers through the narrative of poetry.

Book sales and signing will be offered after the presentation.

Saturday, November 2, 9:30a.m.-3:30 p.m. \$15; optional lunch \$10

"Beneath the Paint: Civil War Graffiti Symposium"

--Speakers and topics include: Kim O'Connell, the history of Civil War Graffiti; Conservator Chris Mills, the technical side of graffiti conservation; and Conservator Kirsten Travers Moffitt, graffiti investigation and conservation at Historic Blenheim. Sponsored by the Northern Virginia Civil War Graffiti Trail.

Reservations required: https://apm.activecommunities.com/fairfaxcityrecdept/Activity_Search/13003

Sunday December 8, 2019, 12pm-4pm

"Christmas in Camp and Making Do at Home"

Travel back in time to learn how Civil War soldiers and the folks back home celebrated Christmas. Meet the soldiers in camp; drill with soldiers; join in with a cease-fire exchange of gifts; house tours; make Handmade Victorian ornaments; write letter to soldiers; sew a "housewife"; pack a food crate for soldiers.



Exhibition at Ratcliffe-Allison-Pozer House

Location: 10386 Main Street, Fairfax, VA 22030
Open Saturdays from 11am-2pm May-October for free tours; or call 703.385.8414 for tour appointment.

"Dr. Kate Waller Barrett: Mother to Many"

Exhibition examines the life of this prominent social reformer of the Progressive Era, who saved the early 19th-century Ratcliffe-Allison-Pozer House from demolition in 1923.

Volunteers and Docents are sought for the city's historic buildings: Ratcliffe-Allison-Pozer House, Historic Blenheim and the Civil War Interpretive Center and Fairfax Museum and Visitor Center. Additionally, volunteers may be interested in assisting with walking

tours and special events. For information email Susan.Gray@fairfaxva.gov, or call **703-385-8415**.

Select historic buildings are open during city special events, including the Chocolate Lovers Festival, Civil War Weekend, Independence Day Celebration, Fall Festival and Festival of Lights and Carols. To arrange group tours of city-owned historic buildings email Susan.Gray@fairfaxva.gov or call **703-385-8414**.

The city has published a free self-guided walking tour brochure that provides a brief history of the city and noteworthy buildings in the Old Town Fairfax Historic District. This brochure is available from the Fairfax Museum and Visitor Center, 10209 Main Street, or call **703-385-8414**.

Select historic buildings are open during city special events, including the Chocolate Lovers Festival, Civil War Weekend, Independence Day Celebration, Fall Festival and Festival of Lights and Carols. To arrange group tours of city-owned historic buildings email or call **703-385-8414**.

The Historic District was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1987. It includes a variety of building and monument types and styles, including:

Fairfax Courthouse (1800)
Ratcliffe-Allison House (1812)
Joshua Gunnell House (c.1830)
William Gunnell House (c.1835)
Ford House (c.1835)
Fairfax Elementary School (1873)*
Old Fairfax Jail (1885)
Old Town Hall (1900)
Marr Monument (1904)

*Fairfax Elementary School was converted into the Fairfax Museum & Visitor Center in 1992.



Lt. Col. Walter J. Potock, Jr. c. 1967.

Photo credit: Collection of Walter J. Potock, Jr.

me into their home. Following a lengthy discussion, which felt a lot like an interview, they unequivocally agreed to support me in my candidacy. Needless to say, from that day to this, I have counted Walt and Charlie Potock amongst my friends. I did not know it then, but their support of me came at a price for Walt. One of my opponents was also his friend and a fellow combat veteran of Vietnam.

Shortly after I was elected, Walt was appointed to the Electoral Board for the City of Fairfax, serving as its chairman. In this role, Walt, was at City Hall often, usually arriving in his little old Toyota pickup truck. One morning, Walt and I arrived at City Hall at the same time. After we exchanged greetings, I noticed that Walt's old truck was sporting a shiny new Virginia license plate. It was a special plate that the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles offers to military veterans and recipients of the *Silver Star*.² I knew that Walt was a veteran of the United States Air Force. I also had a vague recollection that Walt was a veteran of the war in Vietnam, but I had no idea that he was recipient of the Silver Star – the nation's third highest award for

valor. From this point forward the conversation went something like this:

Me: *So, Walt, Silver Star license plate? Wow, that's very impressive. You'll have to tell me about that sometime.*

Walt: *Yeah, Charlie got that for me as a surprise recently. Not much to tell, really, but OK. I was a Bird Dog pilot in Vietnam.*

Me: *Oh man!*

Time went by. When I would see Walt, I would occasionally remark that *we needed to talk about that Silver Star*. Sadly, as of August 21, 2017, we never will. However, the story I wanted to tell about Walt with his assistance is now being told with the assistance of others that knew him well and the legacy he left. Walt, it seems, left an impression on others besides me.

Hubbard, Ohio

Walt was born in the small town of Hubbard, Ohio on March 21, 1934. He was the son of Walter J. Potock, Sr. and Elizabeth Zavada. Walt's father, who was nicknamed *Midge* due to his small stature, was a boilermaker for the General American Transportation Corporation (GATX). GATX built tank cars for the oil industry. His mother was a homemaker.

Walt attended public school in Hubbard and graduated from Hubbard High School in 1952. In high school, Walt played on both the football and basketball teams. Walt apparently liked to sing as he was also a member of the Hubbard High School Boy's Chorus. After graduation Walt went to work briefly for the railroad. In 1954, he enlisted in the United States Air Force.

Walt was commissioned as a 2nd Lt. and was accepted into the Aviation Cadet Training Program. He was sent to the USAF Operational Training Unit located at Bainbridge AB, Bainbridge, GA. Before the creation of the USAF Academy in 1954, the *AvCad* program was used by the USAF for training pilots, navigators



Walt Potock. Hubbard High School Class of 1952. Senior Class (above). # 30 Hubbard HS Football Team (below). Photo credit: *The Bard*, Hubbard High School Yearbook, 1952.

and aircrews. From 1947 to 1961 the Air Training Command of the USAF utilized a four-phase pilot training program: pre-flight, primary, basic, and advanced / crew. Pre-Flight weeded out unfit candidates and sorted candidates into pilot, navigator, and other aircrew categories. Walt was accepted for pilot training.

At Bainbridge, Walt learned to fly on the Piper PA-16 *Super Cub*. He later advanced to the more powerful North American T-6 *Texan*, a single-engine World War II-era advanced trainer aircraft.

In November 1955, Walt received his “wings” and was sent to West Palm Beach AFB where he learned to fly the larger two-engine Grumman SA-16 *Albatross*. The *Albatross* is an amphibious flying boat that was used by the USAF in search and rescue operations.

In 1956, after completing training on the *Albatross*, Walt was assigned to the 36th Air Rescue Squadron at Johnson AB, Sayama, Japan. During World War II, Johnson AB was known as Irumagawa Airfield which was home to the Imperial Japanese Army Air Force Academy. It was also a base for a squadron of the Mitsubishi Ki-67 *Flying Dragon*, medium bomber and later the Yokosuka MXY-7 Ohka, *Cherry Blossom*, a rocket-powered, piloted, kamikaze attack aircraft. While at Johnson, Walt participated in numerous amphibious rescue missions involving downed airmen and stranded mariners.

In 1958, Walt received, what would prove to be, a fortuitous posting with the 551st Airborne Early Warning and Control Wing (AEWC) at Otis AFB, Cape Cod, Massachusetts. At Otis, Walt learned to fly the four-engine Lockheed R-EC-121 *Constellation*. The *Connie*, as it was affectionately known, was an airborne early warning and control, radar surveillance aircraft. Walt flew active air defense missions along the eastern seaboard and far out over the North Atlantic.

In August 1959, Walt met the love of his life, “Charlie” (aka Judith E. McAnern) on a blind date at a Lobster Beach Party on Cape Cod near Otis AFB.

Charlie is the daughter of John Marshall McAnern and Dorothy Mae West, of North Billerica, MA. Two of Walt's pilot friends and their significant others arranged for the blind date. Walt and Charlie were married on April 22, 1961.

In December 1961, the USAF created a new squadron, the 966th AEWG, of RC-121-D, *Super Constellation*, to assist in the surveillance of the communist island of Cuba. Walt was assigned to this new squadron and sent to McCoy AFB (now Orlando International Airport) in Florida. The primary mission of the 966th was maritime and anti-submarine surveillance. The 966th also flew Gold Digger missions, monitoring and tracking U-2 aircraft, flying photographic reconnaissance missions over Cuba. As the radar antenna on the *Connie* is located on the belly of the aircraft, *Connie* pilots had to fly at an altitude of just 50 feet so the radar signal could be "bounced" off the water. At this extremely low altitude the prop wash of the four engines of the *Connie* kicked up an enormous *rooster tail*. The 966th also assisted National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in tracking rocket boosters as they fell back into the ocean after separation from the rockets of the early Mercury, Gemini and Apollo space missions. During the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, the services of 966th AEWG Squadron proved to be invaluable in assisting in monitoring Cuban airspace during the blockade Soviet surface ships and submarines.

It was during this time that Walt and Charlie welcomed their first child, Steven Joseph Potock, born in the spring of 1962 at McCoy AFB.

In the fall of 1963, Walt was selected to attend the USAF maintenance officer's course at Chanute AFB in Illinois. After completing this course he was assigned as a Maintenance Officer to the 7406th Support Squadron, Rhein-Main AB, Frankfurt, Germany. The mission of the 7406th was airborne surveillance and reconnaissance of Eastern European satellite allies of the Soviet Union. The 7406th provided the flight crews for these missions and maintained the aircraft. However, a separate USAF Security Service squadron provided

the recon crews that manned intelligence collection positions onboard these aircraft.

Flying these classified reconnaissance missions was dangerous and shrouded in secrecy. The American public and often the families of the crew members themselves never knew the exact nature of these missions. In 1958, an unarmed C-130A with a crew of seventeen was shot down by four Soviet Mig-17's over communist Armenia. It was not the first time, nor would it be the last time that American reconnaissance aircraft came under attack. During the Cold War, more than three dozen reconnaissance aircraft were shot down. Mission losses were typically withheld from the American public.

Walt had just arrived in Germany when he received new orders to report to Sewart AFB in Tennessee. He left Charlie and the boys in Germany while he attended the C-130A transition program at Stewart AFB in Tennessee. The Lockheed C-130 *Hercules*, is a large four-engine turboprop transport aircraft.

In summer of 1964, their second son, John Michael Potock, was born in Massachusetts.

A New Training Assignment

In January 1967, Walt's military career changed course dramatically. The United States was involved in a brutal war against the communist government of North Vietnam. In early 1967, there was still widespread optimism and support for the war at home and American involvement was at its height. As a result of the increased commitment of American ground forces, there was a critical need for more skilled pilots to support the war effort. Consequently, in February 1967, Walt received orders to the O-1 Forward Air Controller School, ("FAC U") Special Air Warfare Center, Hurlburt Field, Elgin AFB, Florida.

The Special Air Warfare Center provided Vietnam-bound pilots with specialized training in the Cessna O-1E *Bird Dog*. The O-1E was then the primary aircraft used by forward air controllers in Vietnam. Walt attended a Special Air Warfare Indoctrination Course,

Air Ground Operations School and Combat Specialist Course and received specific training on O-1E instrument navigation, dirt strip/short field takeoffs and landings, and visual reconnaissance. He also learned forward air controller strike-control procedures. Specifically, how to identify, approach, and mark enemy positions with white phosphorus smoke rockets. In the unsophisticated O-1E, rockets were fired with the aid of a simple “sight” marked on the windscreen with a grease pencil.³ After marking enemy locations, forward air controllers then directed fighter aircraft against enemy ground targets. Forward air control pilots also had to learn to communicate simultaneously with friendly ground units and fighter aircraft using two different radios.

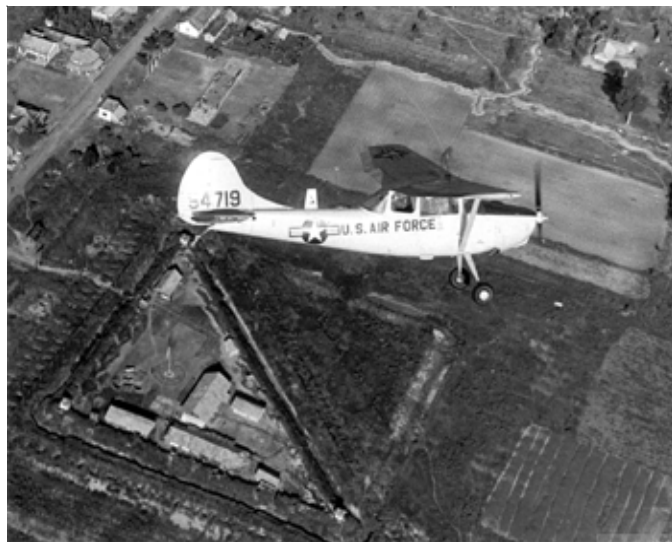
Walt’s training also included night-flight strike-control missions flown in conjunction with C-130 *Hercules* flareships. The year 1967 marked the peak of the Special Air Warfare Center FAC school training program with 655 pilots trained and sent to Vietnam.

The O-1 Bird Dog

The “O” stood for “observation.” Because the mission of the FAC was to search for and the enemy they were given the nickname *Bird Dog*. Hunting dogs who are bred to stop and point their muzzle towards the quarry, most often birds, are commonly referred to as *Bird Dogs*. Their unique action signals to the hunter the direction of the game and where to move his/her gun into range.

The O-1 was manufactured by the Cessna Corporation. It was essentially a civilian light aircraft that carried extra communications gear (FACs usually had at least two radios). The O-1 was also modified with hard points to mount smoke marking rockets on the underside of each wing. The aircraft featured large wrap-around and overhead windows through which pilots could identify targets on the ground and fighters overhead with relative ease.

The small propeller driven aircraft had a single engine capable of a top speed of just over 100 miles per hour when fully loaded with fuel and rockets. Under



O-1E Bird Dog shown here in a reconnaissance role over a Special Forces Camp in the Republic of Vietnam.

Photo credit: United States Air Force www.af.mil/News/Photos/igphoto/2000595127/

normal conditions it could stay aloft for about 4 hours. Although it could fly as high as 18,000 feet, Bird Dogs usually flew low and slow. Its slow speed also meant



Spartan cockpit of an O1 Bird Dog

Photo Credit: Marcel Meres.

that it often took time to get from home base to an area of operation (AO) and it was an easy target for enemy guns.

The O-1 was also equipped with minimal navigational equipment which hindered their ability to fly safely at night or in bad weather. This was a major obstacle because the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong were most active at night *and* during bad weather. Bird Dogs were only able to fly safely under visual flight rules (VFR) and visual meteorological conditions (VMC) as opposed to instrument flight rules (IFR) and instrument meteorological conditions (IMC). Under VFR and VMC pilots were required to be able to see outside the cockpit, to control their aircraft's altitude, navigate, and avoid obstacles (i.e. terrain, clouds, or rain) and other aircraft.

The O-1 Bird Dogs were also unarmored. Pilots were starkly vulnerable to enemy ground fire. The small aircraft also featured no armament of any kind except for their 2.75 inch white phosphorus smoke marking rockets (aka *WP* or *Willie Pete*). Despite its limitations, the O-1 made for an excellent reconnaissance and tactical support aircraft.

FACs also endured the tropical Vietnamese heat in a cabin that was unairconditioned, unpressurized, cramped and noisy. They were often buffeted by thermal updrafts, turbulence and winds. In addition to their radios, FACs also carried a map bag, a survival kit,



USAF O-1 Bird Dog shown here in a target acquisition/tactical air support role over Republic of Vietnam. Note the "observer." The observer was typically another FAC pilot. Photo credit: National Museum of the USAF.



USAF Airman inspecting 2.75 inch white phosphorus smoke marking rockets on an O1 Bird Dog, Vietnam c. 1967.

Photo source: U.S. Army/National Archives.

sidearm, M-16 rifle, (or the smaller CAR-15 carbine), and a knife.

FACs proved to be the vital link between allied ground forces and tactical aircraft on the battlefield. Flying low and slow over the target area, FACs would often draw hostile gunfire to identify the enemy positions. Under the cover of a thick jungle canopy, the enemy were often difficult to spot. They usually moved in very close, often to within just yards, of allied positions. Once enemy positions were identified, FACs marked their locations with smoke rockets or grenades and called in tactical airstrikes, usually with devastating results. Accuracy was critical to insure the safety of allied soldiers. During such operations, FACs remained on the scene and in constant radio communication and visual contact with tactical aircraft and ground units.

Ordered to Vietnam

After completing FAC training in April 1967, Walt was ordered to report to Vietnam. He left in May 1967. Charlie, Steve and John went to stay with her parents in Massachusetts. Before going to Vietnam, Walt gave Charlie a large detailed wall map of Vietnam so that she and the boys could track his movements. Walt's journey to Vietnam included a brief stop at Clark AB in the Philippines where he attended Jungle Survival School, aka *Snake School*. All aircrews going to Vietnam were



Major Walt Potock, Vietnam, w/Miss Manookie c. 1967

Photo credit: Collection of Walter J. Potock.

required to attend Snake School. In the event that they were shot down and forced to survive alone, this training would be invaluable. On reporting for Jungle Survival School students typically received the following minimal equipment – a parachute (for making a shelter or hammock), mosquito netting, poncho, back pack, canteen, and a knife. Over four or five days they learned escape and evasion techniques, how to build cook fires without matches, procure and prepare jungle food (mostly potato-like roots), and obtain safe drinking water from a tree, etc.

From Jungle Survival School Walt went directly to Vietnam. After arriving *in-country* at Ton Son Nhut AB, Walt was required to attend Theater Indoctrination School at Binh Thuy AB southwest of Saigon. The stated purpose of this school was to indoctrinate all newly arrived forward air controllers in standardized procedures for *in-country* FACs (which presumably differs from the training FAC pilots had already received); preparation of FACs for safer combat operations; faster adjustment of FACs to *in-country* lifestyle. Many FAC pilots thought this training to be redundant and unnecessary.

From Binh Thuy, Walt flew to Nha Trang AB, where he was processed into the 21st Tactical Air Support Squadron (TASS), 504th Tactical Air Support Group, 505th Tactical Air Control Group (TACG). From

Nha Trang Walt traveled to Pleiku AB, the headquarters of the 21st TASS, and from there to Kontum Airfield.

21st Tactical Air Support Squadron

By 1966, five Tactical Air Support Squadrons (TASS) had been created to support Tactical Air Operations within four established Corps Tactical Zones (CTZ) in Vietnam.⁴ The squadrons were based as follows:

19th TASS: Bien Hoa AB – IV Corps

20th TASS: Da Nang AB – I Corps

21st TASS: Pleiku AB – II Corps

22nd TASS: Binh Thuy AB – III Corps

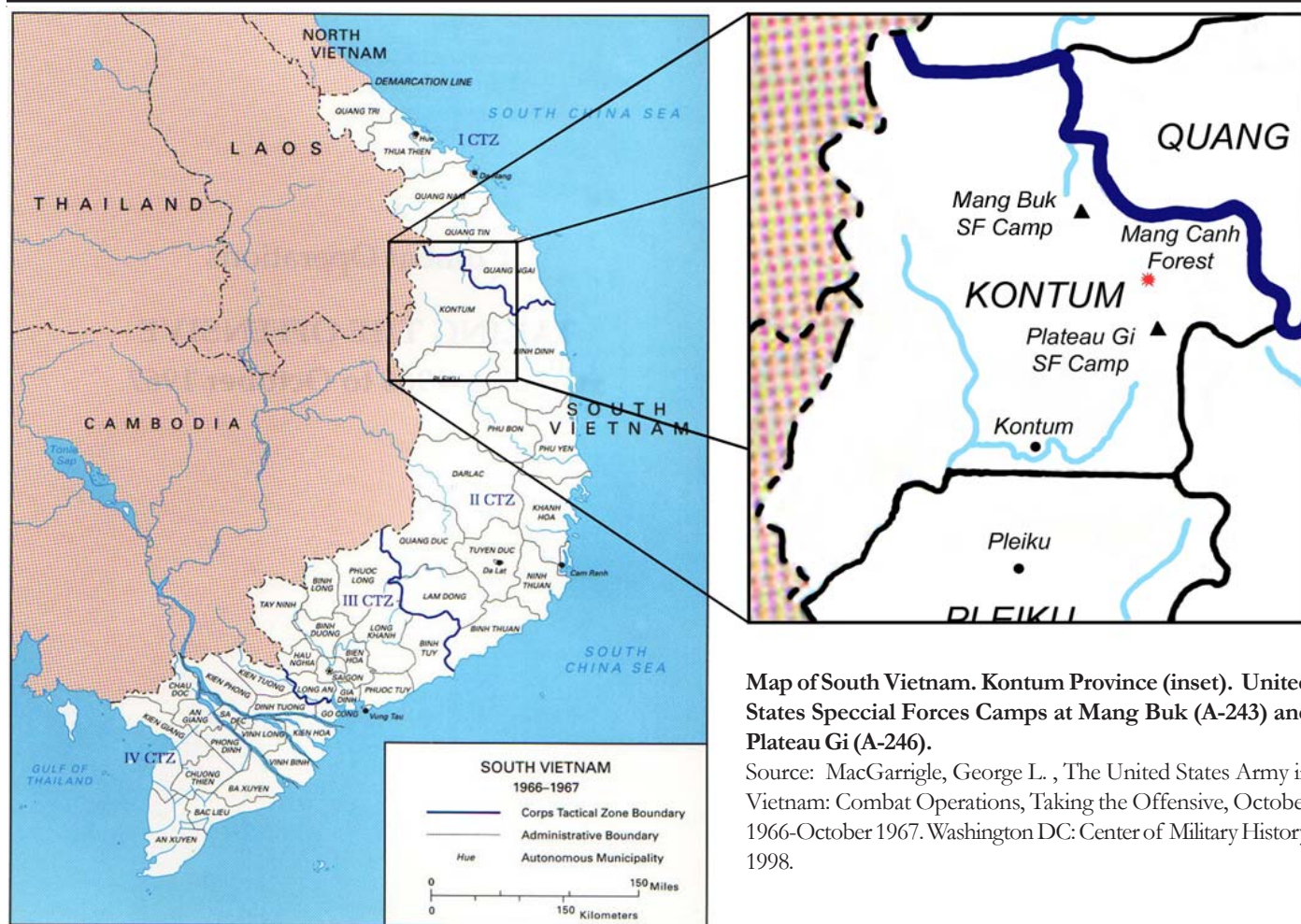
Supporting tactical operations in Laos & Cambodia was the:

23rd TASS: Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai AFB, Thailand.

II Corps was located in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam and was the largest of the four corps in size. It consisted of 12 provinces, and dozens of forward operating locations (FOL).



Members of the 21st Tactical Air Support Squadron, Kontum, RVN, Summer 1967. (l-r) Jim Pierce, Rex Miller, Ed Legg, Dee Henderson, Col. Jubert "Mac" McCrea, Mike Johnson and Walt Potock. Photo credit: Collection of Walter J. Potock.



Map of South Vietnam. Kontum Province (inset). United States Speccial Forces Camps at Mang Buk (A-243) and Plateau Gi (A-246).

Source: MacGarrigle, George L., *The United States Army in Vietnam: Combat Operations, Taking the Offensive*, October 1966-October 1967. Washington DC: Center of Military History, 1998.

Squadron Losses

Before Walt arrived in Vietnam, thirteen FACs from the 21st TASS had already been killed-in-action. The two most recent were CPT Hilliard Almond Wilbanks, age 34, who was shot down on 24 February 1967 after identifying and interrupting a well concealed Viet Cong ambush of a South Vietnamese Army Ranger Battalion. For his actions, CPT Wilbanks was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor; and 1LT John Wayne Mower,⁵ age 26, who was shot down while attempting to takeoff from Special Forces Camp A-243, Plateau Gi, on 25 March 1967. Also onboard was SGT Albert C. Files, Jr., USAF, A-243.

Kontum

Kontum Province is located in Vietnam's Central Highlands and borders the countries of Cambodia and Laos. During the war it was the northernmost province

of II Corps. Some of the forward operating locations (FOLs) and Special Forces camps in Kontum were Dak⁶ Pek, Dak Seang, Dak To, Gia Vuc Mang Buk, Plateau Gi, Plei Me, and Polei Kleng. Almost all of these FOLs featured short dirt airstrips with dangerous approaches flanked by densely forested, rugged and towering mountains.⁷

At Kontum, Walt resided in excellent facilities at the B-24 Special Forces Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) Compound located about a half mile north of the Kontum airstrip. He also received his final *in-country checkout* at Kontum. In addition to the Theater Indoctrination School, all new pilots in Vietnam were required to receive an *in-country checkout*. This was usually conducted at their duty station. For Walt, this consisted of flight time with a senior FAC pilot in order to become familiar with the geography of Pleiku and Kontum provinces; the identification of international borders (Cambodia and Laos) and area landmarks;



B-24 Special Forces Compound, Kontum, Vietnam, c. 2018. Walt resided here in 1967. Some of the buildings still exist and are now used by the People's Army of Vietnam.

Photo credit: www.namwartravel.com/kon-tum/

navigating by map and flying into and out of all airfields, especially the short dirt strips at Special Forces camps; and learning FAC flight techniques in order to stay as safe as possible.

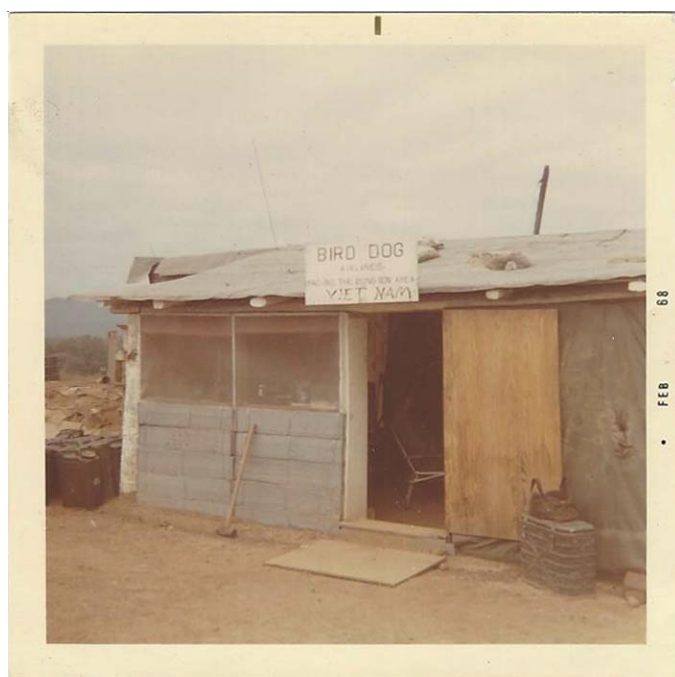
Walt was also assigned his O-1E Bird Dog at Kontum. In keeping with a longstanding Air Force tradition of nose art, Walt christened his plane "*Miss Manooky*."⁸ He had this provocative name painted on the nose of his Bird Dog. During World War II, "*Miss Manookie*" was a female, scantily clad, breasts covered by a flower Lai. Her image adorned the nose of several American aircraft. The B-17, "*Miss Manookie*" was shot down over Germany in 1944 during World War II.

FAC Command Structure

Forward Air Controllers in Vietnam were the single most decisive element in assisting allied units in locating enemy ground forces in battle. FAC pilots were the eyes and ears of the Tactical Air Control System in Vietnam. FAC activity actually began in the Tactical Air Control Center (TACC) which planned and coordinated tactical air support. FAC pilots then sought out and acquired targets then directed strike aircraft to the location.⁹

FAC's were universally respected by friendly troops and feared by the enemy as their appearance over the battlefield meant either imminent salvation or destruction.

At this stage of the war, FACs had a divided command structure. The five Tactical Support Squadrons were assigned to a Tactical Air Support Group at an air base for administration, maintenance, and supply. The 21st TASS at Pleiku AB was assigned to the 504th Tactical Air Support Group Squadron, at Nha Trang AB. FACs of the 21st TASS operated and lived at various forward operating locations (FOLs) in II Corps. Their mission orders came through a different



Line Shack, Kontum Airfield c. Feb. 1968. The sign reads: "*Bird Dog Airlines Vietnam Flying the Kontum Area*"

Photo credit: Collection of Walter J. Potock, Jr.



Control Tower at Kontum Airfield. Photo credit: Ed Calaba

chain of command. The FACs operational boss was an Air Liaison Officer, (ALO), attached to an Army headquarters. A Corps ALO (assisted by two controllers) was assigned to every corps headquarters and supported tactical air operations of the U.S. Army, U.S. Special Forces, Vietnamese Army (ARVN) and Vietnamese Special Forces (LLDB).

The Corps ALO was the direct representative of the Commander, 2nd Air Division and was the Air Advisor to the surface force commander to which he is assigned. He advised the commander in all tactical matters and had direct operational control over all FACs within his Zone.

FACs in Vietnam, in addition to their FAC duties, also served as advisors to the ground commanders to which they were assigned. The FAC at Regiment or

Province level provided the liaison between the ground unit and the Divisional TACP.

Walt was assigned to the 21st Tactical Air Support Squadron at Pleiku AB, but, in actuality, he worked for the ALO for the Central Highlands. Walt's ALO, or boss, was Colonel Joubert Stein "Mac" McCrea, a former B-24 pilot in the Pacific during World II.

Call Signs and Radio Frequencies

Tactical call signs were used extensively in Vietnam. Call signs in Vietnam were a unique identifier to tactical command. Typically, all members of that command utilized the same call sign word followed by a number unique to that individual. For example, when Walt arrived in Vietnam he was assigned the call sign *Cagey 03*. The word "Cagey" identified him as a Forward Air Control pilot of the 21st Tactical Air Support Squadron, and "0-3" was his unique numerical identifier. All unit commanders were typically assigned the first number of a call sign. For example, *Cagey 0-1*, was the call sign of every commander of the 21st TASS.

In theory, call signs and radio frequencies were to be changed monthly or at random intervals in order to keep the enemy uncertain as to who was doing what, where, and when. In reality this strategy caused as much confusion for friendly forces as it did for the enemy. However, most ground units generally adhered to this arrangement. Each month ground unit call signs and radio frequencies were changed in SOI (Signal Operating Instructions). It is important to note that ground units utilized FM and AM radios exclusively in ground-to-ground communication, the same FM and AM radios widely used by the enemy.

The call signs for air support commands tended not to change. Tactical air support commands utilized UHF radio frequencies exclusively in air-to-air communication. UHF was not widely available to ground units including the enemy.

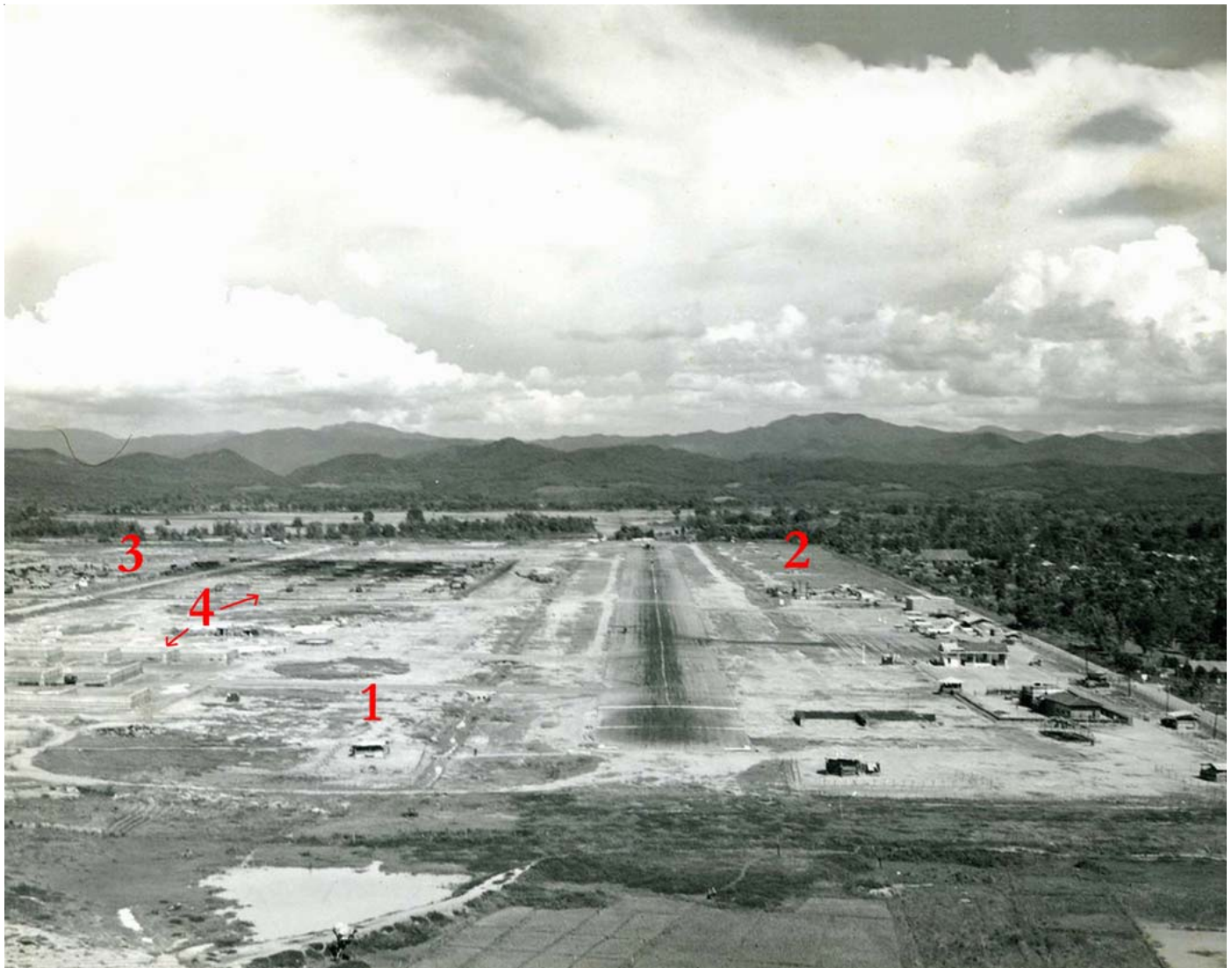
All FACs operating in Vietnam carried both FM and UHF radios for air-to-ground and air-to-air communication. FAC pilots had to be familiar with the latest call signs and radio frequencies of all ground units operating in their sector.

When Walt arrived in Vietnam all FACs of 21st Tactical Air Support Squadron had “Cagey” call signs. However, in the spring of 1967 this call sign was changed to “Elliott” for tactical reasons. The call sign “Elliott” was chosen for all FAC pilot operating in Kontum in order to get the letter “L” into the call sign because the Vietnamese had difficulty in pronunciation of the word with an “L”. In the Vietnamese language the letter “L” sounds like “R”.¹⁰

Visual Reconnaissance

The FACs effectiveness lay in his ability to direct airstrikes and inhibit enemy movement. But first the FAC had to locate the enemy, aka “Charlie.”¹¹ To do this he needed to know their habits, how they traveled and subsisted, and their tactics. Much of this information came from Visual Reconnaissance (VR) which accounted for the majority of FACs flying time.

Before 1966, VR in Vietnam was poorly organized and haphazard. It was user-oriented, mostly unscheduled, and done at the local commander’s request. Compounding the problem, was a significant shortage of O-1’s and FAC pilots.



Kontum Airfield (looking east) 1. Line Shack. 2. Control Tower. 3. MACV Compound. 4. Aircraft Revetments.
Photo credit: Gary Drinkwater

In 1965, a program for repeated VR of all Corps Tactical Zones (CTZ) was established. Subsequently, each Corps Zone was split into Sectors, which a FAC could usually cover within several hours. Each Corps Zone commander worked with his Corps Air Liaison Officer (ALO) to obtain daily VR of topographical features and problem areas peculiar to his Corps. At least one FAC operated in nearly every sector. In sectors requiring additional coverage, more than one FAC was assigned. Scanning the same sector every day, an experienced FAC could detect anything different, unusual or out of the ordinary. The VR program was conducted jointly between FACs of the Army, USAF and Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF). However, the majority of the VR responsibility fell to USAF FACs as they were widely dispersed throughout the country and in an excellent position to gather VR countrywide.

Ordinarily, VR was conducted at 1,500 feet, however, in the spring, the jungle canopy tripled and totally obscured the FACs view of the ground. FACs then conducted cursory VR, concentrating on what

could be seen. The enemy was aware of this and avoided, as much as possible, being in the open.

Walt flew VR nearly every day. He memorized the intimate details of his sector. How many villages there were; how many dwellings or *hootches*¹² there were in the village; how many villagers were living there; what their habits were. He also memorized all the landmarks, especially roads, trails, rivers and streams. Likewise, the locations of friendly ground forces, their planned movements, their radio frequencies and call signs were all of critical importance.

Requests for VR from ground commanders were given the highest priority. These included preplanned requests from ground commanders who wished to recon the ground in advance of a planned operation, as well as immediate requests from ground commanders while operations were underway.

During such missions, Walt would check-in by radio hourly with the tower controllers at Kontum. If he did not check-in at the end of each hour, presumably the tower controller would be alerted that something



Kontum Airfield Runway (looking east) c. 2018

Photo credit: www.namwartravel.com/kon-tum/

was wrong, and search and rescue aircraft would be dispatched to Walt's last known position.

Because Kontum province was mountainous, Walt spent little time engaged in VR of the mountains themselves. Instead, he concentrated on the river valleys, roads and trails. These locations served as the enemy's main infiltration and supply routes. The mountains of the Central Highlands were also sparsely populated, therefore *any* sign of human activity, such as trampled or dusty foliage, newly turned earth, or vehicle tracks warranted closer observation. The enemy rarely traveled during the daytime. Therefore, Walt did not immediately assume anyone he detected during the day was the enemy, even if they were seen wearing *black pajamas* – the standard dress for the VC – or were viewed running away. Innocent civilians were often fearful of being mistaken for the enemy and ran or hid from approaching aircraft. In addition, SF troops and CIDG strikers often donned black pajamas in order to blend in.

In Kontum province, where the jungle obscured almost everything, the real value of VR was simply to harass the enemy and force him to stay hidden. However, on perceiving something suspicious, Walt usually flew lower to investigate and to entice the enemy to reveal himself either by movement or ground fire. The enemy eventually learned *not* to fire on FACs in order avoid detection and the inevitable airstrike. However, if the enemy felt that they had been detected they made a concerted effort to shoot

down the FAC aircraft in order to avoid the airstrike.

Nighttime Operations

The O-1 was of little practical value at night except for harassment. However, as enemy activity accelerated, the USAF extended VR and tactical operations to nighttime hours in 1966. Utilizing the O-1, and later O-2A, OV-10, in combination with orbiting AC-47 *Spooky* flare ships and gunships, dramatically increased the odds for mission success. However, this was problematic, as the initial flash of the flares blinded the aircrews and blotted out the target. Walt mentions this problem in a letter to Charlie on 29 July 1967:

*“Old Spook proceeded to hose down the area with his mini guns and drop about 100 flares. You can’t imagine what this does to one’s eyesight. When we finished, I couldn’t see my way down the valley; in fact I could hardly see anything.”*¹³

Rules of Engagement

Before 1966, the *rules of engagement* permitted only Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) FACs (or observers) to control airstrikes while limiting the role of USAF FAC to that of advisor.

After 1966, control of USAF airstrikes in support of U.S. Army forces was to be directed by USAF FACs. VNAF FACs generally controlled airstrikes in support of ARVN units. As the U.S. troop commitment grew, the rules of engagement were revised. If VNAF FAC was unavailable, a USAF FAC could control the airstrike. In the absence of any FAC, a ground commander or a U.S. pilot supporting the operation could designate the targets. However, to safeguard Vietnamese civilians and their property, only USAF FACs had authority to direct airstrikes against occupied areas after first receiving approval of the Vietnamese province chief.

This commitment to safeguard civilians and their property is reflected in a surviving radio recording of Walt directing airstrikes in support of U.S. Army ground troops near Kontum in the spring of 1967. In the audio recording, Walt, whose call sign was then *Cagey 3*, is heard directing two A-1E *Skyraiders*, call sign *Dragon 1 & 2*, away from an occupied area. Later in the recording Walt is heard directing the A-1Es in dropping their pods of unexpended ordinance in an unpopulated area.

“Cagey 3: OK Lead, if you remember where your first bomb went in about 300 meters short. I don’t want anything south of that little stream where you put that first bomb in. So start ‘em out just north of that little stream there where that first bomb went in

and let them run right up that ridgeline.

Dragon 1: OK, I'm in – am I clear?

Cagey 3: Roger. In sight and you're clear.

Cagey 3: Looks good.

Dragon 1: OK, [Cagey 3] where can we drop our pods?

Cagey 3: Can you go about 5 minutes, make it 3 minutes directly east, at at least eight or nine thousand feet, and drop 'em out there, on the other, ah just across the valley out there.

Dragon 1: OK, directly east, no friendlies, right?

Cagey 3: Negative."¹⁴

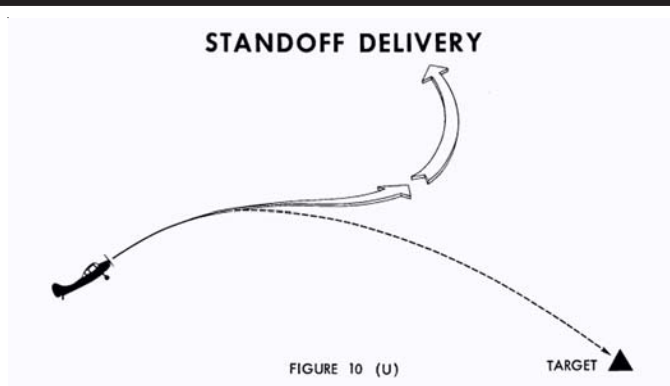
Similarly, the FAC and the ground commander worked together to prevent accidental attacks (i.e. *short rounds*) on friendly forces.

The Airstrike

Once a target was located and approved, tactical air support (TAS) could begin. Whether the airstrike request was preplanned or immediate depended on the situation. If the airstrike was pre-planned, such as a strike against a fixed location like ammunition/supply bunkers or other structure, everything was scheduled in advance. The coordinates, fighters, ordnance, time, etc. A FAC was then chosen by the ALO to coordinate the strike.

If the airstrike was immediate based on a VR sighting or a call for assistance from a ground commander, then the FAC on duty, or the FAC closest to the target area, was assigned or diverted as the situation warranted.

The FAC proceeded to the target area and made radio contact with the ground commander. Likewise, fighters were scrambled or otherwise diverted to the target area to join-up with the FAC. The FAC needed to know what was going on below and typically secured the ground commander's go-ahead before clearing strike aircraft onto the target. To accomplish this ground commanders would relay the position of the enemy and then *Pop a Smoke*, and mark their own positions with colored smoke grenades. The FAC would then mark



One of the rocket delivery techniques Walt learned at Forward Air Controller School.

Source: *The Air Force in Southeast Asia FAC Operations, 1965-1970*. c. 1975, LTC Ralph A. Rowley.

the enemy position with 2.75 inch white phosphorus smoke rockets, known as *WP* or *Willie Pete*. The ground commander then checked the FACs target-marking. The FAC target marking was adjusted, if necessary. As a further safeguard, FACs were required to keep the target or target-marker constantly in view and know at all times where the friendly troops were.

Bomb Damage Assessment

During the course of the airstrike, the FAC measured the results and adjusted fighter headings. After the last aircraft had pulled off the target, the FAC maneuvered his aircraft lower reduced his airspeed and began bomb damage assessment (BDA). Typically, the strike aircraft stood by to supply suppressive fire, if necessary. The controller couldn't take everything in despite the low altitude and slow air speed. At times heavy foliage, hovering smoke, and bad weather impeded his efforts. Despite all this, he most always came up with a fair idea of air support quality. He sent a short BDA report to the strike pilots and a longer one to the TACC through the TACP supporting the unit involved. The audio recording from above includes the following BDA exchange:

"Cagey 3: OK, Dragon, Cagey 3 with BDA?"

Dragon 1: OK, wait about 20 seconds please.

Cagey 3: Roger.

Dragon 1: And 2, on your 10 o'clock now, I'm setting up for a drop.



FAC in an O-1 over the Vietnamese jungle marking an additional target with a white phosphorus smoke rocket. The gray smoke to his rear is the result of an earlier airstrike.

Photo credit: International Bird Dog Association.
www.cessnabirddog.org

Dragon 2: Roger.

Dragon 1: And Dragon 01 to copy.

Cagey 3: OK Alpha Romeo 827952 on target 1425 off at 1445 100 over 100. I'm gonna give you ...let's make it 5 bunkers destroyed...and I give you about five, estimated five KBA (Killed By Air) on that thing, cause they're getting ground fire and mortar fire off that little ridgeline so there must be something in there you put all the stuff right in.

Dragon 1: OK copied 827952...25 at 45... 100 over 100...5 bunker destroyed...estimate 5 KBA.

Cagey 3: That's Charlie, Charlie. [Correct]"¹⁵

Artillery Adjustment

FACs coordinated airstrikes and occasionally helicopter assaults and rescue operations. It was not uncommon for U.S. Army FACs to coordinate artillery support on the same target at about the same time. The FAC had to exercise great care to insure that strike aircraft, helicopters or friendly ground units were not accidentally hit by artillery fire.

The FAC and Special Forces

Throughout the war, USAF FAC support of SF was marked by excellent air-ground coordination. SF relied on FACs for VR. SF ground commanders often flew along with FACs to scout the area in advance of planned missions. In addition, the SF operating in the Central Highlands were typically in locations so remote that they had no U.S. Army ground artillery support. When assistance was required, their only support was by air. Consequently, a blood brotherhood existed between USAF Sector FACs and the SFA-teams they supported.

Operational Detachment-Alpha Teams

U.S. Army Special Forces Operational Detachment - Alpha teams, SF ODA, or *A-Teams*, consisted of 12

men, each with a separate military specialty. Each Alpha team member was trained in unconventional warfare, cross-trained in each specialty and capable of speaking at least one foreign language. A typical ODA team consisted of: two officers—a detachment commander and assistant commander; two operations and intelligence sergeants; two weapons sergeants; two communications sergeants; 2 medical sergeants; and, 2 engineering sergeants. This team framework allowed each detachment to operate separately in two six-man teams, if necessary.

Every new FAC was briefed on all operations and related missions within their sector, including ARVN and SF operations. New FACs met with A-team members in their sector. Unfortunately, given the limited number of FACs and the demands for their services, SF camps were not provided exclusive FAC support. However, SF routinely communicated planned operations with Sector FACs. Likewise, these FACs maintained surveillance and radio communication with SF camp personnel. SFA-team members relied heavily on USAF FACs for VR and close air support of their operations. USAF FACs also routinely stored extra fuel, smoke rockets and ammunition at SF camps.

Rapid air support of small A-teams often meant the difference between life and death. If an A-team ran into trouble, the patrol radioed for assistance through the U.S. Army radio-relay. If airborne, a FAC flying close by usually arrived within minutes.

Occasionally, SF A-teams encountered a much larger enemy force. In such instances a reinforcing mobile strike (MIKE) force from a larger B-detachment was airlifted to the operational area.

Civilian Irregular Defense Units

The Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) program was devised by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in 1961 to recruit, train and equip Montagnard tribesman in the defense of their villages and counter the expanding influence of the communist Viet Cong in the Central Highlands. The Montagnard's, French for People of the Mountains, and principally the Sedang and Bahnar tribes, are the indigenous people of the Central Highlands of Vietnam – primitive, semi-nomadic, with their own separate dialect and no written language. The *Yards*, as they were affectionately known by the SF, disliked the people of both the Republic of Vietnam in the south and the Communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north, who regarded them as savages.

By 1963, the CIDG program had been transferred to the U.S. Army Special Forces. Under

SF, CIDG recruiting expanded with units receiving more extensive training from small teams, designated Special Forces Operational Detachment-Alpha (SF ODA) teams, or A-Teams. In 1965, CIDG units began participating in more conventional offensive operations including search and rescue operations for downed pilots, special reconnaissance, and search and destroy missions against the Viet Cong and NVA.

The ideal CIDG camp consisted of 1) four 132-man CIDG companies; 2) two combat reconnaissance platoons; 3) one civic action and psychological operations squad; 4) a recoilless rifle or 105mm artillery section.



A-243 Team House at Plateau Gi. (l-r) Captain William C. Ferguson, unknown Montagnard CIDG soldier, SSGT Victor R Carroccia.

Photo source: Collection of Harvey L. Colvin.



Team Sergeant Donnie C. Vickers (l) and Captain William C. Ferguson (r), A-243, Plateau Gi, Kontum, RVN c. 1967. Both men would recommend later Walt Potock for the Silver Star.

Photo credit: Collection of William C. Ferguson.



Montagnard children attending school at Plateau Gi c. 1967.
Photo source: Collection of William C. Ferguson.

Operation GREELEY

Shortly after Walt arrived in Vietnam, the United States Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade, under the operational control of the 4th Infantry Division, initiated *Operation GREELEY*. This operation which began on 17 June 1967 was a response to the build-up of North Vietnamese (NVA) forces in Western Kontum Province and a possible major enemy offensive during the monsoon against the ARVN and Special Forces CIDG



Vietnamese Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) Company returning from a patrol c. 1967. These units were made up of indigenous Montagnard tribesmen and were trained and "advised" by United States Special Forces.
Photo credit: U.S. Army.



Group of CIDG armed with WW II era M1 carbines. CIDG were trained and equipped by the United States Special Forces.
Photo source: www.vnafmamn.com

installations in the Northern Highlands.¹⁶

The U.S. had four objectives with *GREELEY*: 1) detect NVA infiltration into Republic of Vietnam; 2) Conduct search and destroy operations to locate and capture or destroy 24th NVA Regimental elements and bases; 3) Provide security for the land line of communications (Highway 14) from Kontum to Dak To; and, 4) Deploy forces for the relief/reinforcement of USSF/CIDG Camps, Regional and Popular Forces, Province/District Headquarters and critical signal sites within the *GREELEY* area of operations.

For Walt, *Operation Greeley* and the summer of 1967 would prove to be a difficult time to be in Vietnam.



SGT Marty Grossman with Montagnard CIDG soldiers at Plateau Gi (A-243) 1967.
Photo credit: Collection of Lawrence Harvey Colvin.

**Plateau Gi (Chuong Nghia)
Mang Canh Forest
11 July 1967**

*"I put in 4 strikes today... all with troops in contact."*¹⁷

Plateau Gi is a lightly forested plateau located between the Dak Ne and Dak Pone Rivers about 24 miles northeast of Kontum in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. The suffix, *Gi* (pronounced *Gee*), refers to the French abbreviation of *Guard Indochine* for the indigenous Montagnard tribesmen who served as French colonial troops encamped here during the French occupation of Vietnam. Additionally, there was an old French Fort located here that was overrun by the Viet Minh in 1954.

Camp Plateau Gi, located on the western edge of the plateau, was originally established in 1962 by the

CIA as part of their Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) program. In 1965, the U.S. Army Special Forces established an Alpha team camp at Plateau Gi. Like nearly all other SF camps in the Central Highlands, A-243 was remote with no usable roads connecting it to the outside world. The camp was supplied by air through an adjacent perforated steel plank runway laid over the red dirt. The triangular-shaped camp lay a quarter mile to the northeast of the runway. A dirt road from the airstrip was the only safe path into the camp as a mine field entirely surrounded the camp.

During the spring and summer of 1967, a particularly grisly aspect of the fighting in the area north of Kontum involved the near constant discovery of human remains from previous engagements. In June, several skeletal remains of Special Forces soldiers and their indigenous CIDG (or "*Sidge*") strikers, were discovered by patrols at several different locations.



U.S. Special Forces Camp A-243, Plateau Gi, Kontum Province, Republic of Vietnam. C-7 cargo aircraft landing on runway (center). Triangular shaped SF camp located in upper right.

Photo credit: Peter A. Bird. www.petester.com and www.c7acaribou.com

Some say the mist shrouded jungle north of Kontum was haunted by the ghosts of those killed. It is true the jungle is full of strange cries and murmurings, especially after dark. The Mang Canh Forest, north of Plateau Gi, is such a place.

11 July 1967 was a typical summer day in Vietnam. Heavy rain from the southwestern monsoon was falling across most of the Central Highlands. Visibility was poor with an extremely low cloud ceiling making all flight operations difficult. Such conditions, however, were ideal and preferred by the enemy when it was necessary to move during daylight hours.

On the morning of 11 July 1967, A-243 commander, Captain William “Bill” C. Ferguson, along with demolitions expert, SP4 Harvey Lawrence Colvin, and medic, SGT Martin “Marty” Robert Grossman, led a CIDG company on a reconnaissance and screening mission south of Plateau Gi. Grossman, who had reported to A-243 on 8 July, only days before, would be participating in his very first mission. By 3:00 P.M., Ferguson and his small force had established themselves in a position along a known NVA incursion route into the Central Highlands from the Ho Chi Minh Trail in nearby Cambodia. He hoped to ambush an NVA Transportation Company ferrying arms and supplies into the Republic of Vietnam.

Not long after establishing the ambush, a solitary Montagnard tribesman came up the trail with his dog. When dog picked up the scent of the friendly forces and alerted the tribesman by barking, he and his dog immediately turned and fled back down the trail in the direction that they had come. CPT Ferguson surmised the Montagnard tribesman was an enemy scout. He sent SP4 Harvey Colvin and approximately 30 CIDG in pursuit. He instructed Colvin to reconnoiter possible enemy positions but not to engage with them as he did not wish to fully leave or reveal his own ambush position.

Colvin headed down the trail, with his CIDG soldiers in the lead. Near a river crossing at the bottom of the trail Colvin caught up with elements of a NVA unit withdrawing to the west.¹⁸ One of Colvin’s CDIG soldiers identified an NVA officer in command of a large caliber machine gun just off the trail. In spite of Ferguson’s admonition, Colvin’s CIDG forced immediately opened up on the gun crew and captured the prized weapon. Bill Ferguson later explained, “*There was a thirty-five dollar bounty on captured machine guns. That was a lot of money for a Montagnard.*”¹⁹ Within seconds, the surrounding jungle erupted with automatic weapons fire and explosions. The ambushers had become the ambushed.



Montagnard village outside the Mang Canh Forest, north of Plateau Gi, Kontum Province, Vietnam, c. 2018.

Photo source: www.planinternational.be/nl/onze-projecten/project/vietnam



Rainforest, Central Highlands, Vietnam. The Mang Canh Forest, north of Plateau Gi looked very similar.

Photo source: www.pixelstalk.net

In the initial exchange of gunfire several CIDG were wounded. However, the most significant casualty was Colvin's radio, which had been destroyed. The radio was Colvin's only link to Ferguson.

Further up the trail, CPT Ferguson and his men heard the firefight erupting near the bottom of the ravine. Ferguson immediately attempted to raise Colvin on the radio. After several minutes, and receiving no response from Colvin or his team, Ferguson gathered an additional 50 CIDG and went to Colvin's aid. SGT Grossman, who was ill with an intestinal virus, was left with the remaining 40 or so CIDG at the initial ambush site.

Ferguson was able to locate Colvin quickly. Colvin and his men had walked into an "L" type enemy ambush. The small friendly force was in imminent danger of being surrounded and destroyed. The enemy force was not a lightly armed NVA Transportation Company as anticipated, but a much larger heavily armed, reinforced NVA Rifle Company equipped with machine guns and mortars.



A-243 Team members who were present at Mang Canh Forest (Plateau Gi) 11 July 1967 (l-r) Captain William "Bill" C. Ferguson, Staff Sergeant Harvey L. Colvin, Sergeant Martin "Marty" R. Grossman. The photo of Ferguson was taken 11 July 1967 the day of the mission after returning to camp at Plateau Gi. Ferguson remarked, *"I was smiling because I was alive."*

Photo credit: Collection of William C. Ferguson and Harvey L. Colvin.



Hit my smoke! Major Walt Potock directing an airstrike Kontum Province, Summer 1967. Bomb going in at left. White Phosphorus smoke (Willie Pete) from rockets marks enemy position at right. Photo credit: Collection of Walter J. Potock, Jr.

When Colvin saw Ferguson he immediately said over and over “*I knew you would come, I knew you would come.*”²⁰ The enemy was so close that they were able to throw Chi-com²¹ grenades among the friendly forces, who promptly picked them up and threw them back at the enemy. After several minutes of this, CPT Ferguson realized that he and his small force were outnumbered and pinned down. Unable to extricate themselves, he placed an urgent radio call to his base camp for assistance. The base camp relayed the message to Kontum.

MAJ Walt Potock, was the FAC pilot on duty at Kontum that day. Even though the weather was terrible, Walt got airborne immediately. In order to reach Plateau Gi he had to fly under the cloud ceiling and up the narrow Dak Nghe River valley. The further he flew, the narrower the valley became. The clouds were so low that they obscured the mountain tops around him. Walt was running out of airspace and had little room to turn around even if he wanted to. About twenty miles up the Dak Nghe River valley there is a narrow gap in the mountains that leads down to a large lightly forested and grass covered plain – Plateau Gi. Walt covered the 24 miles to Plateau Gi in just 20 minutes.

After arriving over the area, Walt established communications with CPT Ferguson. Ferguson relayed the situation on the ground to Walt, indicating his

position, and confirming it with a smoke grenade. Walt maneuvered his aircraft down to 400 feet, just above the jungle canopy, drawing heavy automatic weapons fire. This revealed the enemy position and provided enough of a distraction to enable CPT Ferguson and Colvin to complete their defensive perimeter.

Walt then indicated to CPT Ferguson, that due to the weather and terrain, he didn’t think an airstrike was feasible. When Ferguson reiterated the desperateness of their situation, Walt indicated that it *might* be possible to *guide* A-1E strike aircraft to the scene and agreed to try. He radioed for two A-1E, *Skyriders*, call sign *Hobo*, from Pleiku and directed them to Mang Buk. Mang Buk was located along the Dak Nghe River, 18 miles northwest of Plateau Gi. About 45 minutes later, Walt advised Ferguson that the fighters were over Mang Buk and that it would be necessary for him to leave in order to rendezvous with them. Twenty minutes later, Walt returned with the A-1Es. When the enemy heard the attack aircraft approach, they attempted to break contact and flee further down the ravine and across the river. Walt observed this and marked their location with smoke rockets. He then directed the A-1E’s to drop their cluster bombs directly onto the enemy positions and across their likely path of retreat. The results were devastating. After the first airstrike, all enemy fire ceased and voices could be heard calling for help.

After the attack aircraft had dropped all their munitions, a ground sweep of the area revealed nine dead NVA. Numerous blood trails leading away from the action also indicated additional enemy casualties. The next day a sweep of the area and recount by the 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry confirmed that 21 NVA soldiers, including their executive officer (XO), had been KIA (Killed-in- Action) or KBA (Killed-by-Air).

Walt wrote home to his wife Charlie on 11 July 1967 the same day as the Plateau Gi mission:

“11 July 1967 –

I’m staying here for a while (Kontum). We only have a kid by the name of Henderson

*and myself to do the work and we have been working. (Col. Frobe is in the hospital and a Major is in Honolulu and another guy is not to be trusted) I put in 4 strikes today and Dee²² 3 – all with troops in contact. If I really took the time I could probably transmit to you the words that come from the guys on the ground. If we are lucky and the bombs and napalm go where they're supposed to, we do good work – when we do, we get all kinds of good things from the poor SF on the ground. A simple "thanks a lot Elliott" sounds pretty good."*²³

The above action was recorded in the official Operational Report of 5th Special Forces Group for the period ending 31 July 1967:

*"Elements of a screening operation from Plateau Gi, A-243, in Kontum Province, made contact with a reinforced NVA company at 1500 hours on 11 July. The operation received automatic weapons and 82mm mortar fire until 2030 hours. At this time contact was broken with the aid of artillery fire. Results of the contact were six CIDG wounded, nine NVA killed, and two AK-47's captured."*²⁴

"The only activity in this area occurred on 11 July when a 30 man CIDG patrol from Plateau Gi Special Forces Camp ambushed a reinforced NVA company traveling west to east on an infiltration trail. The initial contact killed two NVA, a 50 man patrol and a 40 man patrol from the Special Forces camp reinforced the ambush patrol, and after an airstrike was called in on the deployed enemy the combined CIDG force were put on line to assault. However, it was soon evident that the automatic weapons of the NVA Company had established fire superiority. Medium artillery from the

*Air Cavalry was in range and began firing in support of the withdrawal of the CIDG elements. The following day three companies from the 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry were helilifted to the PLATEAU GI Special Forces Camp, but sweeps in the contact area produced negative results."*²⁵

After this action a rather humorous incident occurred. As the Plateau Gi Company made their way back to camp they were strung out in a long line along a dark jungle trail. On such occasions, obstacles encountered along the line-of-march are identified and relayed to each man down the line as they are encountered for the safety of each man following – 'Rock ahead,' 'tree,' limb,' etc. To the Montagnard's, the jungle is their home and not a particularly frightening or menacing place. So when they encountered a King Cobra along the trail they did not think to point it out to those following. They merely avoided the snake by stepping aside. SGT Grossman, who was not a Montagnard, and who was on his first combat mission, was decidedly not familiar with Cobra's. The large reptile startled him and he reacted instinctively and unloaded nearly a full magazine from his M-16 on the deadly



A King Cobra along a jungle trail. These snakes are native to Southeast Asia and are the largest venomous snakes in the world. Adults range from 8 ft. to 18 ft. long.

serpent. The sudden sound of Grossman's M-16, in turn, startled the entire company, who, to a man, dove for cover in the surrounding jungle. After the source of the gunfire was located and the enemy quickly identified, the march back to Plateau Gi resumed.

Silver Star Recommendation

Subsequent to this action, CPT Bill Ferguson recommended Walt for the Silver Star Award for his actions that day. The recommendation was witnessed by Team SGT Donnie Vickers.

Ferguson concluded his recommendation with the following words:

*"It is felt that the skill and courage displayed by Major Potock were greatly instrumental in saving the outnumbered force on the ground from serious defeat."*²⁶

When Walt learned that he had been recommended for an award, he wrote of it to Charlie, displaying typical modesty:

*"I could relate 50 experiences like this. We fly by the seat of our pants and wits."*²⁷

Several months later, in March 1968, Walt received the Silver Star Award for the gallantry he displayed over Plateau Gi.

"This Statement constitutes a recommendation for the award of Silver Star to Major Walter J. Potock FV3058410, Sector Forward Air Controller, Kontum Province, RVN.

Approximately 1615 hours, 11 July 1967 a unit of CIDG and its three American advisors were taken under heavy automatic weapons and mortar fire from an estimated company sized force of North Vietnamese Regulars. Utilizing a well concealed "L" type ambush position the hostiles quickly pinned down the friendly force in an untenable position. The hilly and heavily jungled terrain made either advancement or a retrograde impossible for the friendly forces. At this time the senior

advisor relayed an urgent message to his base camp requesting a forward air controller.

Within 20 minutes Major Potock arrived on the scene and communications were established. The immediate presence of the FAC caused the fire of the enemy to diminish and allowed the friendly forces some letter of freedom of movement to establish a defensive perimeter. Initial contact with the FAC established the fact that an airstrike was impossible due to the low weather and heavy rains throughout the area. The FAC had been forced to fly at tree top level up the Dak Ne River valley to arrive over the scene. At that time the FAC was flying at 400 feet and drawing heavy automatic ground fire. Major Potock then decided that by requesting A-1E type aircraft he could divert them to the Special Forces camp at Mang Buk thence down the Dak Ne River valley to the friendly position. By this time a defense perimeter was established and the friendly forces began digging in to repel the constant probes of the enemy.

At approximately 1730 hours Major Potock advised the ground force that the "Hobo" type aircraft were over Mang Buk and that he would have to leave the scene to guide them to the area. At 1740 hours the fighters arrived and communications were established on FM between the ground forces the FAC and the fighters. At the first sound of the fighters the enemy force attempted to break contact and retreat down a ravine to a river crossing. Major Potock saw several of the enemy and immediately marked their position with a smoke rocket. He then directed the "Hobos" to begin laying their CBU across the path of the retreat and directly on the enemy positions. At the first drop of ordnance all enemy fire ceased and voices could be heard calling for help. After the "Hobos" had expended all their stores and departed an immediate sweep was begun by the friendly unit revealing 15 enemy dead and numerous bloods trails.

With darkness approaching Major Potock indicated that he was low on fuel and that he would have to depart the area. At this time the weather had deteriorated to the point that exit by the river valley

was impossible. Major Potock then decided that he would try to climb through the weather and return to his home base on instruments.

It is felt that the skill and courage displayed by Major Potock were greatly instrumental in saving the outnumbered force on the ground from serious defeat.”²⁸



Walt and Charlie Potock. Labor Day 2016.

Photo credit: Janet Fields Jaworski

Endnotes

¹ *Charlie* is a nickname given to Judith Ellen Potock, of MA, by her husband, Walt. "*Charlie*" is a reference to "Charlie and the M.T.A" (Metropolitan Transit Authority) from a hit recording by the Kingston Trio in 1959. It is about a man named "Charlie" who was trapped on the subway and doomed to "ride forever'neath the streets of Boston" and become "the man who never returned" because he lacked a nickel for the exit fare.

² Silver Star is awarded to a person who, while serving in any capacity with the U.S. Army, is cited for gallantry in action against an enemy of the United States while engaged in military operations involving conflict with an opposing foreign force, or while serving with friendly foreign forces engaged in armed conflict against an opposing armed force in which the United States is not a belligerent party. The required gallantry, while of a lesser degree than that required for award of the Distinguished Service Cross, must nevertheless have been performed with marked distinction. Soldiers who received a citation for gallantry in action during World War I may apply to have the citation converted to the Silver Star Medal.

³ Pierson, Richard E., Lt. Col., USAF, Retd., Ho Chi Minh Trail Forward Air Controller, Extraction from Unpublished Memoir 2001 "Warrior, Engineer, Researcher" As accessed by WPJ on April 6, 2019, <http://memory.loc.gov/master/afc/afc2001001/02579/pd0002.pdf>

⁴ For the purpose of military operations, South Vietnam was divided into four Corps Tactical Zones (CTZ) and one Special Capital Zone (Saigon). The four Corps were identified by Roman Numerals I – IV extending in numerical order from North Vietnam and the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) down into South Vietnam. Each Corps was a separate administrative and command area for tactical operations.

⁵ John Wayne Mower b. 4 Dec. 1940, Wichita Falls, Texas, was the son of Nobel Wayne Mower and Jewel Chloe Hanna. He graduated Jacksboro High School, 1959 and North Texas State University, Psyc., Theta Chi, in 1963. He married Linda Katherine Harrison, of Fort Worth, TX on 25 Jun 1964 in Tarrant County, TX. She was the daughter of Robert Arnold Harrison and Donna Katherine Welch. Linda graduated Long Beach Polytechnic High School, 1959, (Valentine Queen, Homecoming Court) and North Texas State University, Elem, Ed., in 1963. She was a Teacher. She m/2 Donald Franklin Dickey (1941-2007), 1 Aug 1972, Tarrant Co., TX. Res. 520 Springhill Dr, Hurst, TX, 76054-2269.

⁶ Dak means a body of water in the ethnic M'ngong language.

⁷ Today the mountains surrounding Kontum are scarred by heavy deforestation of recent years. Because of its sparse population and difficult terrain, Kontum was not significantly affected by use of Agent Orange.

⁸ Nueken is Dutch slang for "to make love." Likewise *Nookie* is English slang for a female sexual partner.

⁹ Simpson, Charles E. Colonel, Deputy Director, Tactical Air Control Center, Summary of USAF/VNAF Tactical Air Control System in RVN, USAF, 1966. As accessed by WPJ on March 5, 2019: <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/F0311/F031100220216.pdf>

¹⁰ Personal communication from Col. DeVere Henderson, USAF (ret.) 19 May 2019. Col. Henderson is a former FAC, "*Elliott 11*", 21st Tactical Air Support Squadron, Kontum, RVN, 1966-1967.

¹¹ During the Vietnam War the US military phonetic spelling alphabet was used. "VC", "*Victor Charlie*," or the more diminutive "*Charlie*," was used to describe a *Viet Nam cong san*, or the abbreviated *Viet Cong*, a *Vietnamese Communist* in the Vietnamese language.

¹² *Hootch* is military slang for the thatched hut homes of the Vietnamese.

¹³ Potock, Walter J. Letter to Judith E. "Charlie" Potock. 29 July 1967. Personal collection of Judith E. "Charlie" Potock.

¹⁴ Transcription of an audio recording made by MAJ Walter J. Potock, 1967. Personal collection of Judith E. "Charlie" Potock.

¹⁵ Transcription of an audio recording made by MAJ Walter J. Potock, 1967. Personal collection of Judith E. "Charlie" Potock.

¹⁶ 4th Infantry Division, Combat Operation After Action Report, Operation GREELEY, for period ending 11 Oct. 67

<https://redwarriors.us/AfterActionReports/AD387626.pdf>

As accessed by WPJ on 19 July 2019.

¹⁷ Potock, Walter J. Letter to Judith E. "Charlie" Potock. 11 July 1967. Personal collection of Judith E. "Charlie" Potock.

Fairfax C.H. News

50 Years Ago

9 Fairfax Democrats in House Race

Walter L. Stephens Jr., 39, of Fairfax City; a lawyer, substitute judge of the City of Fairfax's Municipal Court, former selective service board member, Air Force veteran, and a member of the state bar's grievance committee from the 10th district.

Evening Star, July 13, 1969, p. B-4.

Fairfax City Fills School Units' Posts

Two persons were named to vacancies on the Fairfax City school board last night and former Fairfax County school superintendant E. C. Funderburk was chosen as the municipality's representative on the board of directors of the Northern Virginia Community College.

Funderburk, who has lived in the Little River Hills section since 1961 when he arrived to take over his county job, resigned as superintendent this summer to join the National Education Association in Washington as a special consultant.

The new members of the city school board are Will H. Carroll, a lawyer with the Department of the Air Force, and Harold M. Kline, a 33-year-old assistant principal of George Mason Junior-Senior High School in nearby Falls Church.

Funderburk replaces community college director Guerin Todd, while Carroll and Kline take over posts vacated by Robert Benneche and Mrs. Betty Sale.

Evening Star, September 17, 1969, p. C-6.

100 Years Ago

SWEENEY. On Thursday, July 10, 1919, at 4:30 a.m., at his home here, 729 2d st. n.w., A. A. SWEENEY, aged eighty-three years. Interment at Fairfax cemetery at 11:30 a.m. (Fairfax Court House papers please copy.) *

Evening Star, July 11, 1919, p. 8.

Ed. Note: Adolphous Albert Sweeney was a former Confederate soldier who served in the Fairfax Rifles, Co. D, 17th Virginia Infantry.

GRACE DAIRY FARM, FAIRFAX COURT HOUSE, Virginia; eleven-room house; three min. walk from electric line; price, \$18,000. Estate of W. E. Graham.

Evening Star, July 12, 1919, p. 20.

150 Years Ago

FAIRFAX COURT HOUSE.—The Village of Providence, or Fairfax Court House, by which name it is more familiarly known, is sixteen miles from this city. The trains on the Orange railroad leave here for Fairfax station, within three miles of the court-house, twice daily, at 7½ a. m. and 4½ p. m., connecting with a stage for the court house, the fare for the round trip, including all charges, being \$1.75. The

Alexandria Gazette Tuesday, August 17, 1869, p. 3.

150 Years Ago

HORSE THIEF IDENTIFIED.—Thornton alias Taylor, the colored man arrested in Washington yesterday as a horse thief, has been identified by Mr. Howmen, the proprietor of the stage line between Vienna and Fairfax Court House, as the man who sold him a horse which had been stolen from Mr. Boyd, of this county, as heretofore mentioned in the Gazette. He was committed in Washington for a theft perpetrated in Maryland, but will now be held there to await a requisition from the authorities of this State.

Evening Star, August 26, 1869, p. 4.

200 Years Ago

NOTICE,
*To Wheelrights, Blacksmiths,
Tanners, Harness Makers,
Hatters, Saddlers, &c. &c.*

BELIEVING as I do, that Providence, at Fairfax court house, would be a suitable situation for mechanics of the above description, I offer to furnish, Lots in that village on ground rent forever, on sale—will build and furnish suitable houses, and rent to them, or furnish them brick made and burned, to build with; and invite any who feel disposed to settle there, for the purpose of carrying on their respective trades to advantage, to come and view the situation. It is a very public place, the centre of the county, where the superior and county courts are held, the Little River Turnpike Road, passes thro' this little town from Alexandria to the westward, and where all the public meetings for the county, &c. are held, and where trades of the aforesaid description being carried on, would meet with great encouragement, and be a public convenience to the country around, no situation more healthy, good water, and fire wood cheap. Mechanics of the above description must very generally depend on the country people, farmers, &c. to be their

customers. Here they would be in a convenient situation for all the purposes. I invite a call, and view for themselves. I would also furnish lots adjacent, from one to five acres each, for cultivation, pasture, &c. on moderate terms—all of which can be shown, and terms made known on application being made to **R.D. RATCLIFFE,**
Fairfax Court House, Va.
March 8 atwrawif

Alexandria Gazette July 9, 1819, p. 4.

Fairfax County,

June 21st, 1819.

AT a large and respectable meeting of the citizens of Fairfax county, convened for the purpose of forming an Auxiliary Colonization Society, William H. Fitzhugh, esq. was called to the chair, and Charles G. Broadwater appointed secretary—when, after the adoption of a constitution and necessary rules for their government, the following officers were elected for the ensuing year:—

Wm. H. Fitzhugh, esq. president; Robert T. Thompson, Alexander Waugh, Wm. E. Beckwith, Daniel F. Dulany and John Reid, vice presidents; George W. Hunter, James Sangster, Richard C. Mason, John W. Ashton and Wm. Moss, managers; John Moore, treasurer; and C. G. Broadwater, secretary.

On motion, it was resolved, That the board of managers be requested to take as early and as efficient measures as possible for the attainment of the objects of the society.

Resolved, that the thanks of this Society be presented to the chairman for the able manner in which he has presided at this meeting.

C. G. BROADWATER, Sec'y.
June 25

Alexandria Gazette August 2, 1819, p. 4.

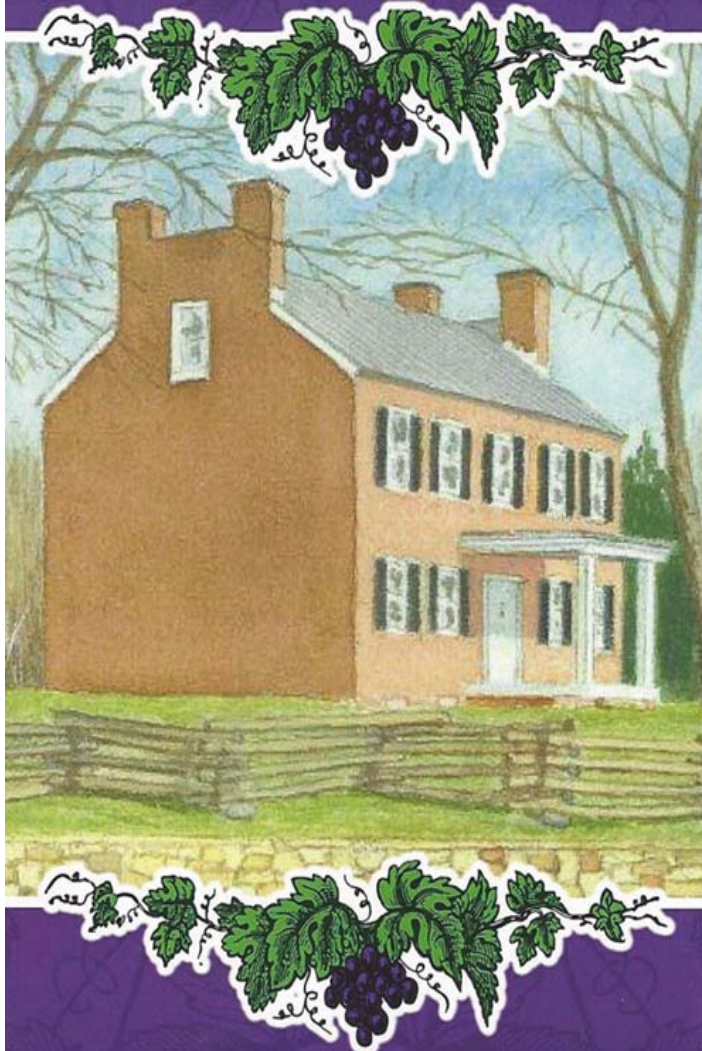
Ed. note: The American Colonization Society was formed in 1816 in Washington, D.C., to establish "colonies upon the Western Coast of Africa, to restore, by their own consent, the free people of Colour in America, to the bosoms of their own kindred and people, and to the luxuriant soil of their own country...." Auxiliary, or local chapters were established throughout the south.

A Taste of the Vine

HISTORIC FAIRFAX FUNDRAISING EVENT

Friday, October 4, 2019

6:30PM-9:30PM



BLenheim CIVIL WAR INTERPRETIVE CENTER

3610 OLD LEE HIGHWAY, FAIRFAX, VA 22030

Presented by Historic Fairfax City, Inc., a 501(c) (3) non-profit organization that preserves and manages historic properties to increase public awareness and appreciation of Fairfax historic properties, including Blenheim, Old Town Hall, Fairfax Museum, Ratcliffe-Allison-Pozer House, and Grandma's Cottage.

A Taste of the Vine

HISTORIC FAIRFAX FUNDRAISING EVENT

Friday, OCTOBER 4, 2019

BLenheim CIVIL WAR INTERPRETIVE CENTER

3610 OLD LEE HIGHWAY, FAIRFAX, VA 22030



Wine tastings provided by
Gray Ghost Vineyards

Celebrating 25 years of Southern Hospitality

Catering provided by
Dolce Vita Italian Kitchen & Wine Bar

Amazing Silent Auction Items

Net proceeds benefit Fairfax City historic properties.

**Reservations at historicfairfax.org
or mail reservation card and check to**



Historic Fairfax City, Inc.
c/o Fairfax Museum
10209 Main Street
Fairfax, VA 22030

**For further information, call 703-385-9455
or email Lindamb3510@yahoo.com**

Name: _____

Address: _____

Email: _____

☐ Yes we will attend. Number of attendees ____ x \$60⁰⁰

☐ I cannot attend, but please accept my donation of \$ _____

Total Enclosed \$ _____

*If you would like to be a sponsor, your name/organization will be recognized in event promotion;
call or email Linda Baringhaus at 703-385-9455 or Lindamb3510@yahoo.com*

"Preserving the Past. Protecting the Future."

Return Address - Historic Fairfax City, Inc.
John A.C. Keith, President
10209 Main Street
Fairfax, VA 22030



The Newsletter of Historic Fairfax City, Inc.

The Fare Facs Gazette © 2019
Editor: William Page Johnson, II

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