

Open Season on Crickets

By the beginning of 1967, Route 23 had dried out enough for full-scale use, and the North Vietnamese had established their overall pattern for the dry season. Route 23, which had much more extensive jungle covering than Route 911, provided additional redundancy and dispersion of traffic. The Communists began sending almost equal amounts of traffic down the eastern (Routes 911 and 91) and the western (Route 23) corridors.

The redundancy was not without costs to the North Vietnamese.

Maintaining both roads required a greater investment in AAA weapons and in people to man the guns, repair the roads, maintain the trucks, and manage the truck parks. Route 23 required nearly 90 miles of driving to cover the same distance traversed by a 50-mile segment of Route 911. The FACs preferred the double route structure. Covering both routes from the air was easy enough, and the AAA along Route 23 never matched the concentrations around the interdiction points on the eastern corridor. By early January, the AAA/AW deployments along Route 911 were deadly, especially for fliers who challenged the guns at 80 miles per hour.

As the Cricket FACs, now using the call sign of Nail instead of Gombey, patrolled throughout the entire Cricket area, the increased antiaircraft defenses began taking a toll of the Crickets. On January 2nd, two Nail FACs were working the Dog House, just south of Mu Gia, when the leader heard bursts of antiaircraft fire. He called for both FACs to dive to gain airspeed.

The wingman, Lieutenant George Menges, answered that he was "Okay and on your tail."

Lieutenant Menges did not respond to any succeeding radio calls. He was listed as missing in action (MIA). He had been with the 23rd TASS for about six weeks and was on his 34th combat mission.

Immediately after the loss, the 23rd TASS requested that the O-1s again be restricted from missions into the Dog House. No reply was received from Seventh Air Force.

On the morning of January 17th, Lieutenant Alva Krogman's O-1 was caught in a crossfire inside the Chokes, the triangular area that separated interdiction points ALPHA, BRAVO, and CHARLIE. He was flying below an overcast in the squadron's O-1 that had been painted black for night tests. Spads 13 and 14, two of NKP's T-28s, broke off a nearby attack and responded to the Mayday call of Nail 48 and rushed to the Chokes. Captain William Cogdell in Spad 13 dived his T-28 down toward the wreckage of the O-1 to see if he could locate a parachute. His aircraft was caught by heavy automatic weapons or 37mm fire, and the right wing burst into flame. Captain Cogdell's aircraft did not pull out of the dive and crashed just east of ALPHA.

Sandies 7 and 8, two A-1Es that had been on SAR alert at NKP, soon reached the area and confirmed what the FACs already knew: the Chokes were one of the most dangerous areas in Steel Tiger. The O-1 and T-28 had crashed within a few miles of gun positions that had also downed an A-1E and an F-4C within the past three months. The SAR commander quickly called off the rescue effort since it appeared that neither pilot had survived the morning's two crashes. He concluded that it was "impossible for Jolly Greens to work this area and cover aircraft could not survive under existing conditions."

The T-28 section of the 606th Air Commando Squadron had started combat missions over the Steel Tiger during the previous week. Captain Cogdell's death was the section's first combat fatality in Laos. The Air Commandos immediately phased the T-28s into a night armed reconnaissance role in which the slow flying craft would be more survivable and more effective than against heavily defended targets in the daytime.

Lieutenant Krogman had been a Cricket FAC for less than three weeks and was on his 16th combat mission. He was the seventh consecutive

Cricket FAC lost without rescue near the Trail.

Obviously, the O-1s could no longer be sent against the AAA concentrations in central Laos at the same altitudes flown against the small arms and automatic weapons in South Vietnam. Seventh Air Force directed that Cricket pilots fly at a minimum of 6,000 feet above the ground in areas of known 37mm AAA firings. This order put FACs at higher altitudes over Mu Gia, most of Routes 911 and 91, and the upper end of Route 912. Although flying above the effective ranges of the known AAA/AW was a key to survival for the slow flying FACs, effective VR became considerably more difficult. There was some debate among the FACs that instead of taking both FACs very high, a more effective tactic might have been to put one very high and one very low. The FACs needed to see under the trees, and flying at treetop level was much more effective for that mission than searching from a mile above the trees. With practice and a lot of teamwork, the high FAC could direct the low FAC over jungle-covered areas where trees offered some protection. This tactic would help locate the truck parks that were camouflaged well away from the main roads.

There were obvious dangers. Even with just the 500 feet of separation between FACs at the higher altitudes, the high FAC found it difficult to keep the randomly maneuvering low FAC in sight at all times. Keeping a treetop-level FAC in sight from several thousand feet higher would require intense concentration and would have limited the high FAC's maneuverability. Both FACs would have been more vulnerable, so the improved intelligence gathering capability of the high/low tactic would have been accompanied by higher loss rates than were expected from putting both FACs high.

The two O-1 losses by mid January presented an interesting and somber picture when the author and three other future Cricket FACs arrived at the 504th Tactical Air Support Group (TASG) headquarters in Bien Hoa in late January. (The 504th TASG had succeeded the 505th Tactical Control Group as the parent group of the tactical air support squadrons.) We were scheduled for an in-country checkout and theater indoctrination at Binh Thuy in the delta of South Vietnam. Afterwards, we were going to something called the 23rd TASS in northern Thailand. There was an unexpected and encouraging twist-if we flew a certain number of "special operations" missions, we could go home at the end of 10 months, instead of 12. When the 504th personnel were asked for more information on the assignment, they said they could not tell us anything else; we would find out when we got there. The secrecy lent an air of excitement and adventure to the assignment and would have seemed pretty "cool" if we had not seen the grease-pencil chart on the wall behind the desk where the sergeant was busily typing our new orders. The chart told much more about the operations at NKP than the assignment personnel were saying.

A typical "How goes it" display of information on the five tactical air support squadrons, the chart included such things as FACs authorized and assigned, combat losses, etc. The data for the 23rd TASS showed 48 FACs authorized and 39 assigned. The more ominous columns indicated that two 23rd TASS FACs had been lost in combat and two had crash landed at NKP in January-and there were still four days remaining in the month.

A degree in engineering was not necessary to conclude that a rate of two combat losses and two crash landings per month represented something for everyone on a one-year tour in a 48-man squadron. Considering that the squadron was not fully manned, we began to understand why the 23rd TASS FACs were being allowed to go home early-if they survived for 10 months. We exchanged a few nervous jokes about the sample size being too small to make any firm conclusions.

By the time we reached NKP on February 7th, the unfavorable statistics had grown.

On the morning of February 6th, Captain Lucius Heiskell, a 23rd TASS FAC, was directing an airstrike in Mu Gia Pass when his O-1 was struck by AAA fire. Unable to control his disabled aircraft, he parachuted into the

jungle east of Route 15, about three miles into North Vietnam. Radio contact was established, and Captain Heiskell said he was trying to evade nearby troops. The Jolly Greens rushed to the area but were unable to establish contact prior to the arrival of low cloud cover.

The rescue force returned in the afternoon when the weather improved and Captain Heiskell came back up on the radio. When the Jolly Green crew spotted Captain Heiskell, Sergeant Duane Hackney made his second descent of the day, suspended on the jungle penetrator beneath the hovering helicopter. Minutes later, Captain Heiskell and the young pararescueman were pulled safely into the Jolly Green. That news caused wild elation among the FACs who were gathered around the radio in the squadron operations building. At last, one of the FACs had been rescued near the Trail.

The jubilation evaporated quickly and was replaced by anger and bitter tears. As the HH-3 maneuvered to climb out of the deep, narrow canyon and into the safety of the low clouds, the helicopter was staggered by a quick series of AAA hits. Sergeant Hackney was blown from the helicopter and miraculously survived the fall into the jungle with a partially buckled, partially opened parachute. Captain Heiskell and the remainder of the rescue crew crashed in the burning helicopter. Sergeant Hackney was rescued a few minutes later by the accompanying Jolly Green.

For his extraordinary heroism on that day, Sergeant Duane Hackney was awarded the Air Force Cross and the 1967 Cheney Award. .

Captain Heiskell had been a member of the 23rd TASS for six weeks and was on his 37th combat mission.

New FACs arriving on February 7th found the Crickets' morale at the lowest level of the entire operation. Captain Heiskell's disastrous near-recovery had a stunning effect. The loss of three new FACs in a five-week period demanded a change if the VR/FAC missions over the Steel Tiger were to continue during the dry season. This was critical since nearly 40 percent of the Nails had arrived at NKP in the six weeks since Christmas.

Colonel Elwyn Cranford, the 23rd TASS commander, directed all Nails to remain clear of the Dog House. Even at higher altitudes, Mu Gia Pass was not a reasonable place for flying the O-1. Colonel Cranford recommended a more aggressive program of flak suppression, including radar-directed bombings of known threat areas. If slow FACs were to remain a viable reconnaissance and strike control force in central Laos, retaliation against ground fire had to be "immediate and credible." As a result, a FAC receiving groundfire was given priority, second only to RESCAP requests, for the diversion of available fighters retaliate immediately against the attacking guns.

The downing of three new Crickets drew the FACs together in even closer bonds of camaraderie. The experienced FACs spent a great deal of time with the "rookies," helping the new FACs become "combat-wise" as rapidly as possible. The squadron rebounded quickly. The low morale was once again replaced by the deep sense of pride in sharing the accomplishment of a dangerous mission.