

The Last A-1's in SEA

The month of November marked the end of the combat operations for one of the oldest units in SEA, the 1st SOS, and the last combat strikes by USAF A-1's. The 1st SOS and the A-1s have earned a chapter in Air Force history for their search and rescue operations in SEA. In November all the A-1s were turned over to the South Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) and all squadron personnel were reassigned.

(S) On November 3rd the first group of Sour A-1s, was turned over to the VNAF at Bien Hoa. The following day four more A-1's were flown to Bien Hoa to strengthen the Vietnamese Air Force. The last remaining A-1's at UP, five F models, were flown out on the 5th. The 1st SOS was left with six A-1's on Sandy alert at Da Nang, until the 7th when they were turned over to the VNAF at Bien Hoa.

On the 9th, 7th Air Force decided that six A-1's were needed for Sandy Alert at Da Nang; Six pilots left for Bien Hoa to pick up the aircraft on hand receipts from the VNAF. By the 11th the six were on alert at Da Nang. On the 15th November the aircraft were returned to the VNAF and the Air Force's A-1 inventory was zero.

On 7 November Capt. Screws and Maj. Ohr (Sandy 7 & 8) successfully completed the last SAR for the 1st SOS. Coachman 159, an Army Huey helicopter with seven survivors, was downed in the evening before an unknown cause on the Song Tra Khuc River approximately 15 miles east of Quang Ngai, SVN. A typhoon was forecasted to hit the area around 1800 with winds as high as 140 knots. The weather had prevented King and several Army helicopters from spotting the location of the survivors. The Sandys launched knowing any delay would cause the SAR force to be grounded by the typhoon, leaving the survivors in enemy territory. The first two attempts to reach the survivors by the Sandys were thwarted by heavy rain, severe turbulence, and low clouds. Capt. Screws, Sandy 7 was able to reach the survivors' location on his third attempt by flying at dangerously low altitudes and sheer determination. The Jolly's were scrambled from Da Nang landed at Quang Ngai. They had landed to refuel. They took off to pick up the survivors. During the ingress, the clouds forced Sandy 8 and the Jolly's to fly up the river at less than 100 feet, but the Jolly's were able to reach the area and pick up the seven survivors. During the ingress the Jollys came under small arms fire. The last SAR for the 1st SOS exemplified the resourcefulness and courage displayed by Sandy aircrews in their efforts to rescue downed airmen.

1st SOS History, July – December 1972

The last SAR involving the SANDYS occurred on 7 November. An Army Huey helicopter with seven survivors was downed approximately 15 miles west of Quang Ngai, South Vietnam. With time of the essence, the SANDYS were launched, despite the forecast of a severe typhoon. Because of the heavy rain, turbulence and low clouds, the A-1 crews were forced to fly at dangerously low altitudes (200 ft or less) in order to locate the survivors. Once their exact location had been determined, the SANDYS protected the departing rescue helicopters by effectively silencing the small arms fire that was harassing this bold rescue.

Source = History of the 56th Special Operations Wing, Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand, Volume 1, 1 July – 31 December 1972 located at AFHRA

As the squadron closed down, the aircrews were reassigned throughout the USA and PACAF.

The outstanding job the 1st Special Operations Squadron has done in SEA can best be expressed by the countless number of downed aircrews who have been saved from the POW/MIA list. Col. Norbert Simon, Commander of the 56th Special Operations Wing, summed up many peoples feelings in a letter to the 1st SOS when he said "It is with pangs of regret that I see 5 November 1972 come to pass. This day marks the last time our ramps and runways will respond to the throaty roar of the mighty A-1. God knows we hate to see the valiant crews of the Hobo Squadron disband and leave NKP. There is a vacuum that cannot be filled. I can only extend my thanks to a magnificent group who have done a fantastic job in Southeast Asia. I can only say good luck and God speed to you loyal Hoboes and Sandys."

Source = History of the 56th Special Operations Wing, Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand, Volume 1, 1 July – 31 December 1972 located at AFHRA

COMMANDER'S COMMENTS:

(S) As we finalize the last historical report of the 1st Special Operation Squadron, it might be appropriate to acknowledge the fine briefing and instructing the SOS pilots accomplished teaching the A-7 pilots to assume the SAR role in Southeast Asia. Several weeks of intense briefings, instructing and playing the role of a survivor in the field encompassed the training program.

The A-7 assumed the responsibility for the SAR role on 15 Nov 72 and to date have accomplished 3 successful SARs. The first one in North Vietnam, a real tough one, gave the A-7 personnel the confidence required to pick up this new and demanding task. The personnel of the 1 SOS are sure the A-7 will be able to accomplish this mission and continue the fine traditions started by the A-1 Sandys. We are all pleased that the A-7's will use the "Hobo" and "Sandy" call signs while flying their demanding missions in Southeast Asia.

(3) Although the A-1's are gone, the mission will be carried out. For the A-1 and the 1 SOS Sandy and Hobo pilots this is the end of an era.

Source = History of the 56th Special Operations Wing, Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand, Volume 1, 1 July – 31 December 1972 located at AFHRA