

COMBAT CONTROL TEAMS

New Breed of AF 'Commandos' in Vietnam

Another in a series on the men and machines of the Pacific air forces.

By FOREST L. KIMLER
S&S Task Force Chief

SAIGON—The man standing on the edge of a small clearing in the Vietnamese jungle was a mystery to the natives who watched him from the trees.

He had appeared seemingly from nowhere—some said from the sky, others said from the nearby sea—and he appeared unconcerned that he was deep in Viet Cong territory.

He was 1st. Lt. Donald R. Horton. He carried an AR-15 rifle, was dressed like a Special Forces trooper, and appeared to be deliberately exposing himself to any snipers who might be in the area.

Satisfied that the jungle strip was clear, he waved his arm and two similarly dressed sergeants materialized out of the undergrowth with a radio.

Horton spoke briefly into the microphone and in a few minutes a big C-123 Provider troop carrier swooped down, hit the dusty clearing, reversed its engines with a roar and screeched to a halt at the edge of the “runway.”

From the cargo compartment of the plane, Vietnamese and U.S. troops rushed out and set up defenses around the newly claimed jungle area, as Horton and his radio crew talked other planes in and out of the area.

Horton and his men could have come out of the sea like Navy frogmen, or dropped from the air like paratroopers, or slipped miles through the jungles on foot to fight and secure the airstrip like marines, and set up their portable air control facilities like the old Army Pathfinders.

They had been trained for all these jobs and more.

They are the Air Force's newest teams to be employed in the jungle warfare of Vietnam.

“They're real tigers, and they're eager to get a piece of the action.”



That was the evaluation of the Air Force's Combat Control Teams by Lt. Col. Floyd Irving, commander of the 315th Air Div.'s 7th Aerial Port Sq.

The S&S Task Force decided to keep dropping in on dirt strips in Vietnam until we found Horton for a story on this newest Air Force mission.

It took us five days to track down the fast-moving Air Force commandos but then one day there was Horton on the edge of a narrow runway carved out of the jungle, listening to the chatter of gunfire to the rear and directing control of the air traffic, in front of him.



“The Viet Cong have set up a roadblock five miles down the road,” he said, “That’s why we are here in the first place. They can’t stop us from delivering the goods by blocking the roads as long as we can get these planes in over their heads.”

Left; Combat Control Team members (left to right) SSgt. Maurice Gentry, SSgt. Bobby E. Cottingham, and AIC Kay Duncan provide the protection for CMSgt. L. B. Lewis (kneeling) when they are on a mission.

From 20 feet, Horton looked the picture of a jungle fighter in his jaunty beret, jungle boots and .45 on his hip.

“My team is the second to be used in Vietnam,” he said. “Every one of us is a volunteer. That means we volunteered for Combat Control and then had to volunteer for jump school to get in to the outfit.

“We come in any way we can to set things up and provide portable tower facilities for the planes to bring in the troops to hold the field.”

Every Combat Controller has to qualify as an expert or sharpshooter with rifle and pistol and be familiar with various other automatic weapons, in addition to being a career man in control tower operation and ground radio maintenance.

CMSgt. L. B. Lewis, who was in on the ground floor of the development of the Combat Control Team concept, worked with the Army Pathfinders in Europe doing the same job for the Air Force in World War II.

He said that by the time Combat Controller goes through parachute school, combat training, survival school and parachute rigging school, he can handle almost any assignment on any terrain.

“We don’t go in alone, however,” explained Horton. “We usually drop or come ashore with an Army assault team that protects our backs while we are setting up the radio facilities to direct the aircraft.”

The airlift control center at Tan Son Nhut gives the Combat Control Team its missions in Vietnam and, as Horton says, "When there is a fire, we run." "Normally, we go in an hour ahead of the main body of troops," Lewis said.

"We are determined to direct them in where they are supposed to be and not let some of the mistakes of World War II happen again when airborne parachutists found themselves hanging from church steeples, trees, houses and scattered over a five-mile area.

"Combat Control is a dangerous job and you sometimes only get one chance. But every time I step into that doorway to make my jump, I know the importance of my job and I know I'm going." When the fields are secured, the permanent port facilities set up and tower operations established, the Air Force's own commandos pack their radios, roll up their parachutes, shoulder their rifles and move on.

"There's one thing we always know about the next place," Horton grinned. "It won't be dull."

Sent by Patrick Aguilar

Note from Don Horton, 2/21/2014; I bet you can pick out what I told him and what he made up - I think Sgt Lewis told him all about the pathfinder stuff and going in 1 hour before - I did not = I think I saw him about ten minutes on the ground at Vung Tau = at left is the only picture that I have of the first mission - we did not provide any ATC - Vung Tau had tower - the square box shows the position of the VC being worked over by the gunships = I definitely did not step out of the jungle and whisper in to the mike, etc. I had a meeting with TSN ALC after this trip they set up some rules about when they would send CCT out - Bob Farmer leader of the 1st team had the same problems - read Gene Adcock's book, Eye of the Storm and get a better story..... Don

