

FROM: OLAA-56 SpOpWg (C)

20 June 1970

SUBJECT: End of Tour Report (Lt Col James W. Wold, Commander OLAA-56 SpOpWg,
DaNang Airfield, RVN, 14 Jul 69 to 20 Jun 70)

TO: 56 SpOpWg (DCO)

1. This report briefly presents impressions gained by the undersigned during his one year tour flying A-1H combat missions out of Pleiku AB and DaNang Afd, RVN. Total combat missions and hours flown were 241 and 587 respectively. The majority of sorties, an estimated 75%, were close air support missions in direct support of US Special Forces long range reconnaissance patrols and Special Forces camps. Frequently these missions were scrambled off the alert pad in response to Prairie Fire emergencies or tactical emergencies with troops in contact. Remaining sorties were flown on search and rescue (SAR), helicopter escort, and those interdiction/strike missions flown prior to deactivation of the 6th Special Operations Squadron in November 1969.

2. OLAA Organization and Mission:

a. Mission: A general misconception has prevailed among some sections within the 56th SpOpWg concerning the role and mission which was inherited from the 6th SOS upon its deactivation, and which is now carried out by OLAA at DaNang Afd. Maintenance at NKP apparently understood that aircraft would stand alert without flying frequently. What was not understood was that the only mission that was given up when the 6th SOS deactivated was the fragged daily strike sorties, both in-country and out. Requirements for the Prairie Fire mission and SAR alert did not change. Those two missions accounted for approximately 50% of the total sorties and flying time flown by the 6th SOS at Pleiku. Another misconception was that Prairie Fire sorties were to be fragged and therefore firmly planned. Sorties as such are not fragged; four aircraft are fragged to be maintained on alert, backed up by spares, to respond to as many sorties in any given day as are generated by requests from Covey FACs for as long as the aircraft remain operationally ready (OR). One of the Army's principle of operation for exfil/infil tactics is that generally Spads are required overhead before commencing the operation, with rare exceptions. The Prairie Fire concept on this side of the fence apparently differs considerably from that at NKP, especially concerning the concept of fragged sorties, which does not apply in our DaNang operation.

b. Organization:

(1) Because of the consistent 90-95% OR rate, the Prairie Fire/SAR missions are optimally supported by the ten aircraft force. What this means is that, with the turn-around flexibility inherent in the present force, we now respond immediately to an estimated 85-90% of all Prairie Fire requests at the time they are needed. With two more aircraft we could satisfy close to 100% of all requests at the time needed. Conversely, any number less than ten aircraft would be detrimental to the mission by extending the recock time for turn-around crews, which is the key factor in our excellent response to date.

(2) The ten (10) OE unit is essentially half a squadron. The Administrative workload is not proportional, however, and is probably close to that of a full squadron. The one authorized Administrative Clerk, AFDC 70250, in addition to standard orderly room administrative functions, must also function as a Personnel Specialist (actions involving APRs, OERs, 1098s, promotion rosters, testing and classification actions, assignment actions, etc.), as well as managing the unit mail room. He is not trained in personnel work and consequently the entire orderly room operation lacks efficiency and effectiveness. There is adequate justification for authorization of a Personnel Specialist AFSC 752X0 in addition to the Admin. Clerk. A manpower study is recommended to evaluate this area for increased manning authorization.

c. Future Operations: With a shift in emphasis to operations in Cambodia, the unit may be required to increase its scope of operations. Additional strike missions as well as a semi-permanent detachment on SAR alert at Pleiku are possibilities which may require evaluation of current manning and equipment levels. It is recommended that contingency plans be developed against such requirements.

3. Fast Mover FAC Concept and Tactics: The majority of major SARs which have occurred in high threat areas such as Ban Karai, Ban Phan Nop, etc. have involved the fast mover FACs, i.e., Misty, Wolf, Stormy, Playboy. Without particularly questioning the concepts for the fast mover FACs, the tactics certainly appear to be subject to questioning. Repeated low passes over known high threat interdiction points are an invitation to getting shot down, which in turn brings into play the high vulnerable SAR forces. The question is whether the repeated passes yield information significant enough to balance the risk of losing the jet aircraft and possibly crew. During the SARs for Misty 11, Wolf 06, Playboy 16, Laredo 02, Stormy 03, Misty 15 additional losses of helicopters, A-1s and pilots resulted in many cases. Was the information originally sought by the FAC crew worth the losses incurred in the ensuing SARs? Poor tactics in the way of second and subsequent observation passes at low altitudes are the primary causes for the losses. An analysis of aircraft losses related to Fast Mover FACs, SAR losses and the relative worth of information gained by the FAC may well merit a deeper look into the entire concept. The real requirement may be for a High Threat Hunter type aircraft with real-time reconnaissance/data link imagery systems which could capture the desired information on one pass.

4. Close Air Support (CAS) Aircraft: With the A-1 force steadily decreasing and no other aircraft available to replace it, the need for the A-X becomes more urgent. The A-7D cannot meet all the requirements ranging across the CAS spectrum. In particular it cannot operate in close confines of mountainous terrain under a low overcast ceiling where the A-1 can and does operate in Southeast Asia. Neither does the A-7D have a 3-4 hour loiter capability. There is without question a requirement for the A-7D. There is also an urgent requirement for the A-X, not only to cover the lower end of the CAS regime, but also to complement future SAR forces. Should a gap develop in the Air Force's capability to provide CAS due to attrition of A-1s and failure to develop a follow-on aircraft, the Army will develop its own CAS capability with its AH-1G Cobra, armed twin Hueys, and the AH-56 Cheyenne gunship helicopters. The Air Force needs the A-X in its present concept: simple; faster than the A-1; highly maneuverable; twin recip/turboprop engines; 4-5 hours of fuel; armor plating; 3-4 ton payload; austere base capability; a single pilot; the 30mm gun; and low cost relative to the A-7D.

5. Rescue Force Aircraft: In addition to the need for a follow on to the A-1 for SAR operations (reference preceding paragraph), it is believed that the Air Force should test and evaluate small helicopters as a complement to SAR forces. A lesson can be learned from in-country rescue operations with Army light helicopters. Their maneuverability under extremely low weather conditions, the capability to hover at high altitudes, the small profile for enemy gunners, and low cost relative to the CH-3 and CH-53 may recommend them as a valuable component of the SAR forces in the low threat environment, for the pickup function as well as to provide suppressive firepower.

6. Design Concepts in New Weapons Systems: If one major lesson is learned from this war, it should be that the notion is false that sophistication and complexity are necessary to create an effective weapons system. There is no substitute for skilled and discipline pilots. A single pilot using his eyeballs and flying a conventional old fighter can deliver ordnance within ten meters of friendly troops with greater reliability than a supersonic fighter with pilot and systems operator and sophisticated fire control systems. Both have their place, however the emphasis in the past decade has been on the latter at the expense of the former, to the ultimate detriment of the Air Force.

7. Ordnance: One of the truly outstanding developments of this war has been the CBU. The CBU-25 in particular is perhaps the most effective and most highly regarded air-delivered weapon in South Vietnam.

8. The A-1H unit at DaNang is a crackerjack outfit, made so by the pilots/maintenance/armament men, the airplane they fly, and its missions of close air support and SAR. Its resources are limited, but on a busy day it does the job of an entire squadron and the American taxpayer is getting one hundred cents on the dollar in value. This command has been the most rewarding experience of my career to date, and I am proud to have been one of the Spads.

James W. Wold, Lt Col, USAF

Commander