

## Messing with Forward Air Controllers

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One of the best things about being in the gun platoon was the sense of superiority we felt over all things living. I mean, you take the age of each individual flying in a light fire team, add them up, and then divide by the amount of rockets aboard both ships, the rounds of 7.62 and 40 mm, and then subdivide by the pounds of fuel; and the sum result is the average age of maturity aboard the aircraft.

And then, the rules we lived by didn't particularly cause a certain conservative lifestyle. Let's see...

- Rule 1: You can have all the ammo you want.
- Rule 2: The vast areas that you will fly over are considered your domain, where you are free to kill and burn as you want.
- Rule 3: The two aircraft together are worth over \$1,000,000. If you break them, we will give you brand new ones.

So anyway, here we were cruising down life's highway -- actually Highway 13. I had my doorgun unhooked from the bungee, barrel out and laying on the floor, as did my gunner.

My feet were up on the cabin bulkhead; and I was slumped down, smoking a cigarette, drinking a beer from the cooler, and listening to rock and roll on AFVN via the ADF radio ... probably pretty much like I would have been doing at home in my 64 Chevy SS; but in this case, we were six feet off the highway, doing 90 knots, and trying to run cyclo carts into the ditches.

I casually glanced over at my gunner in time to see him sit up and stare out to the right front of the aircraft.

"Sir, aircraft 2 o'clock about two miles, looks like an FAC."

I sat up and looked across the aircraft through the pilot's window and could see him slightly higher than us, and we were catching up to him.

The FAC was a Forward Air Controller flying in an O-1 Birdog. It was a small, fixed-winged, observation plane. The Air Force used them to control the jet fighter bombers during air strikes, while the Army used theirs to correct artillery fire.

The aircraft commander in the left seat in front of me, reached down to the radio console and flipped his selector to Channel 3.

"Crossbow 31, 33. Close on us and join up in trail."

And then he turned and grinned at the pilot.

"Let's scare the \*\*\*\* out of the FAC!"

Our wingman called, "Formation up."

The AC said, "I've got it" and dropped the nose, picking up some speed.

We started closing on the FAC from slightly below his six o'clock position.

He appeared to be doing about 80 knots and was maybe at 200 feet. Actually, he was probably working; but he was at an altitude that almost guaranteed him some sheet metal damage from ground fire. He was painted gray, so we knew he was an Air Force FAC and not an Army Artillery spotter. That made it even more fun, because we rarely got to mess with the Air Force pukes.

As we closed on him from behind and low, we had built up our speed to a face-stretching 100 knots. The AC keyed his microphone and spoke with our wingman. "31, 33. We're going to pass under him and get out in front by a hundred yards or so, then climb out in front of him. Climbing now, then diving under him."

Then we did. We swooped up and then dived down with Crossbow 31 right beside us. As we passed under the FAC, I was laughing in glee as was Johnny my gunner. We zoomed ahead and then climbed swiftly; and, as Johnny and I looked back, we could see the O-1 Birddog hit our rotorwash and bounce all over the sky.

With a friendly wave out the back, we once again resumed our trip down Thunder Road leaving a trail of ditched pedicabs, angry Vietnamese, and vengeful-minded FAC pilots.

We were almost home, and I was debating whether or not to open another beer, when our wingman frantically called us.

"THREE THREE, THREE ONE!!!!"

As my pilot started to flip the radio selector to answer him, I saw Johnny sit up straight and rigid and stare straight out to the right. I tried to see what he was looking at, but I suddenly felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up; and I slowly turned to look out my side.

There were two, F-4 Phantom IIs, gear down, dive brakes open, with full flaps, cruising right along side me. They were probably doing twice our speed; but time seemed to stand still, as the front seater in the Phantom closest to us, casually raised his left hand with the middle digit raised.

As they passed to the front of us, they joined up with two more of their buddies, who had overtaken us on the right. With the precision of the famed Thunderbirds, they closed up a quarter mile in front of us, back into a finger-four formation. You could almost hear the flight call the marks...

"Gear up....NOW!"

"Brakes in...NOW!"

"Flaps up.....NOW!"

"Afterburners..NOW!"

And then suddenly they were gone, hidden from view by the burning explosion of eight Pratt and Whitney engines at full military power. The only thing we could see was the smokey contrails as they zoomed up out of sight. I could plainly hear the Aircraft Commander as he yelled, "OH, \*\*\*\*!!!"

Then we hit the little present that the zoomies had left for us. We went up and then down, and then up, down, up, down as the pilot fought to control our bird.

Ten minutes later, we had quietly hover taxied down the active runway to our revetments at Lai Khe. As we sat down, the FAC started his flyby down the length of the active runway, cheerfully giving us, out his open cockpit window, that special salute to fellow aviators that seemed to be used Air Force wide.