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14. ABSTRACT

Project CHECO was established in 1962 to document and analyze air operations in Southeast Asia. Over the years the meaning of the acronym changed several times to reflect the escalation of operations: Current Historical Evaluation of Counterinsurgency Operations, Contemporary Historical Evaluation of Combat Operations and Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations. Project CHECO and other U. S. Air Force Historical study programs provided the Air Force with timely and lasting corporate insights into operational, conceptual and doctrinal lessons from the war in SEA.

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PROJECT CHECO SOUTHEAST ASIA REPORT

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PROJECT
Contemporary
Historical
Evaluation of
Combat
Operations
REPORT

USAF SUPPORT of SPECIAL FORCES IN SEA

10 March 1969

HQ PACAF

Directorate, Tactical Evaluation

CHECO Division

Prepared by:
Mr Kenneth Sams
Lt Col Bert B Aton
Project CHECO 7th AF, DOAC

DOTEC-69-31

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PROJECT CHECO REPORTS

The counterinsurgency and unconventional warfare environment of Southeast Asia has resulted in the employment of USAF airpower to meet a multitude of requirements. The varied applications of airpower have involved the full spectrum of USAF aerospace vehicles, support equipment, and manpower. As a result, there has been an accumulation of operational data and experiences that, as a priority, must be collected, documented, and analyzed as to current and future impact upon USAF policies, concepts, and doctrine.

Fortunately, the value of collecting and documenting our SEA experiences was recognized at an early date. In 1962, Hq USAF directed CINCPACAF to establish an activity that would be primarily responsive to Air Staff requirements and direction, and would provide timely and analytical studies of USAF combat operations in SEA.

Project CHECO, an acronym for Contemporary Historical Evaluation of Combat Operations, was established to meet this Air Staff requirement. Managed by Hq PACAF, with elements at Hq 7AF and 7/13AF, Project CHECO provides a scholarly, "on-going" historical evaluation and documentation of USAF policies, concepts, and doctrine in Southeast Asia combat operations. This CHECO report is part of the overall documentation and evaluation which is being accomplished. Along with the other CHECO publications, this is an authentic source for an assessment of the effectiveness of USAF airpower in SEA.

Milton B Adams

MILTON B. ADAMS, Major General, USAF
Chief of Staff

[redacted]

DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
HEADQUARTERS PACIFIC AIR FORCES
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FOREWORD

The first Air Commando units arrived in Vietnam in November 1961, and since then the USAF has become an integral component in supplying Special Forces Camps with tactical airpower, airland/airdrop replenishment of supplies and instant guidance, as well as short reaction airpower to ground reconnaissance teams. In its special Seventh Air Force/5th Special Forces (SF) partnership, three primary roles of the U.S. Air Force are recounted.

First, when vulnerable Special Forces Camps came under attack, it was USAF firepower that provided the heavy counterblows in their defense. More than one camp owes its continued existence to the quick and devastating reaction of the USAF. Second, Special Forces Camps have been almost entirely dependent upon airlift for their logistical support and this, too, has been a vital mission of the Air Force. Finally, in 1965, the U.S. Air Force began an association with Special Forces ground reconnaissance teams; it has produced some of the most efficient and effective ground missions of the war.

The expanding role of Air Force Forward Air Controllers in Special Forces operations--an expansion strongly urged by SF commanders throughout the Republic of Vietnam--is addressed in Chapter V.

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CHAPTER I

ORGANIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF SPECIAL FORCES OPERATIONS

Since 1961, the U.S. Army Special Forces (USASF) have been continuously training, advising, and supporting paramilitary forces in South Vietnam and, more recently, conducting long-range reconnaissance patrols (LRRP) along the Cambodian/Laotian borders. These paramilitary troops were indigenous, ethnic minorities such as Montagnards in the Highlands and Cambodians in the Delta, or politico-religious sects such as the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai. The Vietnamese Government relations with these minorities were poor. The Montagnards, especially, distrusted and resented the Vietnamese government; the Government of Vietnam (GVN) had settled hundreds of thousands of North Vietnamese refugees on Montagnard tribal lands. The Vietnamese, on the other hand, considered the Montagnards primitive people not to be trusted with guns. Naturally, the Viet Cong exploited this lack of strength of the Vietnamese government in the Highlands and the mutual antagonisms between the Montagnards and Vietnamese.[1/]

Thus, the U.S. attempted to resolve the situation and moved into the military vacuum. In late 1961, U.S. advisers began the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) program to arm the Montagnards for self-defense. Though the later CIDG program evolved away from the initial concept, it still had much in common with the first efforts. The CIDG program began as a strategic hamlet program for the ethnic minorities and other people outside the major Vietnamese programs and sought to organize local security forces. The U.S. was the primary mover for the CIDG program. Initially, the Combined Studies

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Division of the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), Vietnam, exercised operational control, with the U.S. Special Forces providing advisers and logistical support. By July 1963, the MAAG personnel were phased out and the Special Forces, who had been on TDY to Vietnam, assumed full operational control and responsibility for the CIDG program.[2/]

The CIDG concept envisioned Vietnamese Special Forces (VNSF) commanding local irregular forces hired under contract and called Camp Strike Forces; U.S. Army Special Forces would advise. These personnel would establish a fortified camp (called an Area Development Center or CIDG camp) in selected areas and visit the surrounding hamlets to encourage local hamlet defense. The Special Forces would train local hamlet militia, aid in fortifying the hamlets, and supply the necessary money, material, and guns. Once an interlacing complex of fortified hamlets was established, the CIDG concept envisioned a fluid "defense in depth." Scouts and patrols would reconnoiter local trail systems for enemy movement. Upon discovering approaching enemy, the patrols would alert the nearby hamlet militia, which would ambush and harass the enemy, while the nearby villagers evacuated toward the nearest CIDG camp or other designated fortified camp. Meanwhile, the CIDG Strike Force would move toward the enemy, thereby shielding the withdrawing villagers, while other nearby Strike Forces would converge to flank and surround the enemy.[3/]

Hopefully, this intermeshed local defense system would severely restrict enemy movement and bring to bear sizable local forces. Most importantly, the local population would be defending themselves and, by participating, would build confidence in themselves and "their" government. Theoretically, the

Government of Vietnam would receive credit for the improved security and thereby gain the loyalty of the minority groups.

That was the theory. The inaugural project in the Highlands conformed to the theory, though ultimately that project foundered on the shoals of Vietnamese-Montagnard distrust. In November 1961, the Special Forces began careful preliminary work among the Rhade of Darlac Province. By gaining support of the tribal leaders in advance, the Special Forces won acceptance of the program by whole villages. Such prior agreement to participate, preceded initiation of the military training or civic action programs. Buon Enao became the first fortified camp in the greater Ban Me Thuot area, where approximately 68,000 of the 100,000 to 115,000 Rhade lived. The tribal leaders helped secure manpower for camp construction and encouraged men to join the CIDG forces. By the end of 1962, the greater part of populated Darlac was declared secure. At that time, there were about 200 villages, 60,000 villagers, 1,500 CIDG irregulars, and 10,000 militia defenders in the Rhade program.[4/]

The Buon Enao project was turned over to the GVN in several phased steps in 1963 and, according to U.S. authorities, suffered from the indifference or active hostility of the GVN. Ngo Dinh Diem, President of the Republic of South Vietnam, feared a strong, armed Montagnard society in the Highlands. CIDG troops and health officials were no longer paid; supplies and money were cut off; government officials made few visits to coordinate the program, and there were even some attempts to take away the weapons of the Montagnards. By the end of 1963, the Buon Enao project no longer functioned effectively.[5/]

While the Buon Enao project grew and decayed, the Special Forces expanded the number and deployment of CIDG camps. By the end of January 1963, there was a total of 25 operational sites in all four corps. By August, nearly 15,000 Strike Force irregulars and 38,000 hamlet militia served in the CIDG program. By mid-June 1964, the number of CIDG camps had increased to 36, with 18 positioned along the Laotian and Cambodian borders.[6/]

In its early years, the CIDG program moved away from a strict hamlet defense system toward more aggressive offensive operations. Less advanced work was done with local populations prior to siting new camps and more camps were built in isolated areas. The Buon Enao concept of a network of villages defended by local militia forces gave way to counter-guerrillas operating out of fortified camps and actively seeking to fight and kill the enemy. Civic action became secondary to killing Viet Cong. Rather than carefully cultivating local villagers to join the CIDG, the advisers took the faster means of bringing in strike forces already trained. There was less emphasis on the fluid "defense in depth" and more on strongly fortified CIDG camps capable of withstanding massive enemy attacks.

In late October 1963, the U.S. Special Forces assumed responsibility for the Border Surveillance (BS) program, which had begun in June 1962 under direct MAAG control and employed "Trailwatchers" and later "Mountain Scouts." In the next month, the CIDG program absorbed four BS camps. Although local defense and civic action projects were conducted when local populations lived nearby, the primary mission was to screen South Vietnam's western border and locate enemy infiltration. By the spring of 1964, the BS camps composed half--

18 of 36--of the Special Forces CIDG camps.[7] This added impetus for building isolated, strongly fortified camps deep in enemy territory helped set the stage for many of the now famous battles for the Special Forces camps such as: Plei Me, A Shau, Kham Duc, and Dak To.

In May 1964, Project LEAPING LENA, later renamed Project DELTA, began to dispatch reconnaissance patrols into areas where the VC moved freely. Special Forces, CIDG troops, and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) rangers ran reconnaissance patrols, set ambushes, directed airstrikes, and provided a relief force for deployed reconnaissance teams. The ARVN 91st Ranger Battalion (Airborne) was on call to exploit discoveries made by Project DELTA.[8]

The growth and expansion of U.S. Army Special Forces from purely advisory roles in hamlet defense into overt and covert operations against the enemy represented a significant step in U.S. involvement in a conventional ground war in South Vietnam. On 1 October 1964, the 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne) (5th SFGA) was activated and personnel were transitioned from TDY to PCS; however, it was the vast influx of conventional U.S. ground forces into Vietnam beginning in early 1965 that changed the complexion of the war. For the Special Forces, the expansion of the conventional war meant a further shift toward offensive operations.[9]

In mid-1965, the Mike Force was established as a corps-level reaction force for CIDG camps under attack or heavy threat. The emergencies encountered the previous fall by small camps in II Corps led to formation of a reaction force--actually, a detachment of an Eagle Flight helicopter reaction force.

Based on this experience, on 1 August 1965, Mike Force was established in each of the four corps. A 5th SFGA letter to MACV later described the Mike Force mission:[10]

> *"...to constitute a Corps reserve; conduct raids, ambushes and combat patrols; reinforce CIDG camps under construction or attack; search and seizure operations, and the conduct of small scale conventional combat operations to include airborne operations."*

In May 1965, COMUSMACV set a target date of 1 January 1967 for conversion of all CIDG camps to Regional Forces units (the normal GVN district forces). Attempts were made to turn over CIDG camps to the GVN, but these attempts almost always failed. Just as happened in the Buon Enao project, without American control, the resulting disorganization and deterioration destroyed the utility of the program. Thus, the Special Forces continued to control the CIDG camps.[11]

By mid-1966, the Special Forces and their CIDG irregulars joined more often in joint operations with U.S. Army divisions. In June, Operation NATHAN HALE (II Corps--1st Cavalry and 101st Airborne Divisions) demonstrated the effectiveness of deploying CIDG units with conventional forces. In the same month in III Corps, a Mike Force engaged a Viet Cong battalion in fighting that developed into Operation ATTLEBORO. In February 1967, in Operation GATLING (II Corps--101st Airborne Division), CIDG forces were brought together quickly into a provisional battalion.[12]

Some other innovations implemented during the period from August to

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SPECIAL FORCES IN RVN

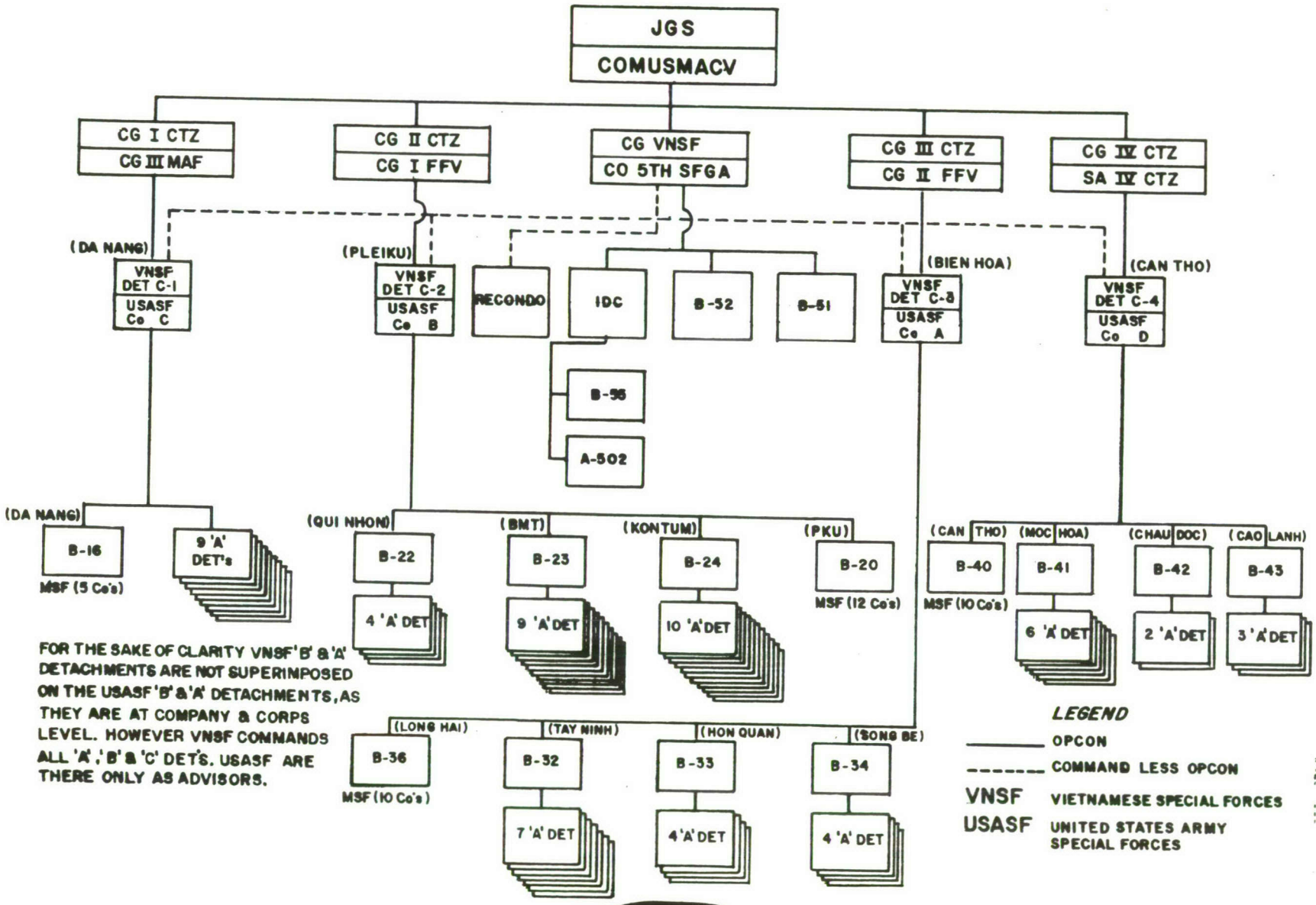

FIGURE 1

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October 1966 were the creation of Omega and Sigma Detachments, establishment of the MACV Recondo School (which was supervised by Special Forces), and creation of a Mobile Guerrilla Force (MGF). To supplement the long-range reconnaissance patrols of Project DELTA, the Omega and Sigma detachments were created under operational control of I and II Field Force, Vietnam respectively. The Recondo School trained selected U.S. and Free World Forces personnel in LRRP techniques. It was the MGF that further formalized the offensive trend of Special Forces operations by creating counterguerrilla teams. These "economy of force" units established secret patrol bases, interdicted and harassed enemy forces, and, in general, conducted guerrilla war against the enemy in remote areas previously considered Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army (VC/NVA) territory. These MGF units had Mike Force personnel advised by U.S. Army Special Forces.[13/]

By mid-1967, there had evolved several Special Forces projects and units which were involved, in varying degrees, in long-range patrols, counterguerrilla operations, and reaction backup. The subtle distinction between Project DELTA, Mike Forces, and Mobile Guerrilla Forces was none too clear. On 10 October 1967, the Mike Force and MGF were redesignated Mobile Strike Forces. Thus, after six years of evolution, the CIDG Special Forces program in South Vietnam included Combat Reconnaissance Platoons for LRRP, Camp Strike Forces for limited operations around CIDG camps, and Mobile Strike Forces for camp reaction and counterguerrilla operations. Obviously, there remained much overlapping of missions and areas of operation.[14/]

By January 1969, Special Forces in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) were

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organized as shown in Figure 1. The U.S. Army Special Forces, numbering more than 2,500 officers and men, were organized into 5th Special Forces Group Airborne (5th SFGA) with its Headquarters at Nha Trang. The primary mission of the 5th SFGA was to advise and assist the Vietnamese Special Forces (VNSF), which had grown to a strength approaching 3,800. The principal activity of these Allied Special Forces was to recruit, train, and support the CIDG force. The CIDG was a paramilitary force composed of civilians who were recruited to serve as soldiers; the only formal military status of CIDG soldiers was that they were exempt from the draft during the period of their CIDG service. The CIDG was organized into Camp Strike Forces (CSF) and Mobile Strike Force Commands (MSFCs) with a combined strength of more than 42,000 men--the equivalent of four ARVN divisions.[15/]

The Camp Strike Forces were normally recruited from the population surrounding a Special Forces Camp. Thus, the recruits were intimately familiar with the terrain, local inhabitants, and the political and economic conditions prevailing in the area in which they served. Camp Strike forces had a total strength of more than 33,000 men, based at a steadily increasing number of camps scattered throughout South Vietnam (in February 1969, 61 Special Forces camps were manned). The typical Camp Strike Force was organized into four light infantry companies, two combat reconnaissance platoons, a political warfare team, crews to man both 105-mm howitzers and 106-mm recoilless rifles, plus miscellaneous specialized units as demanded by the local situation. Each Camp Strike Force was assigned a defined geographical area called a Tactical Area of Responsibility (TAOR), in which to conduct its operations. These TAORs were approved by both political and military officials for CIDG

activities. Within its TAOR, each CSF attempted to reduce or eliminate the enemy threat and destroy his infrastructure; simultaneously, an effort was made to spread the influence of the Vietnamese Government by providing security for the local population and conducting political warfare programs.[16/]

The Mobile Strike Force was recruited and trained to serve as a mobile reserve to reinforce camps that were under attack; they also performed reconnaissance, and conducted raids, ambushes, and combat patrols, as well as small-scale conventional combat operations. By February 1969, the total strength of the Mobile Strike Forces was nearly 9,000 men. These troops were organized into five Mobile Strike Force Commands: one MSFC was deployed into each of the four Corps Tactical Zones (CTZ), under the operational control of the corps commander; the fifth MSFC was based at Nha Trang and served as a country-wide reserve. The MSFCs were organized on the brigade concept; thus their strengths varied. The nucleus, a headquarters and service company plus a reconnaissance company, could be augmented by a variable number of infantry battalions--usually ranging from two to five battalions of three rifle companies each.[17/]

The 5th SFGA performed its mission through three types of Detachments. "C" Detachments were collocated with the VNSF Headquarters for each of the four Corps Tactical Zones at Da Nang, Pleiku, Bien Hoa, and Can Tho. Next, down the chain of command, were th "B" Detachments that advised in the command and control of CSFs and MSFs; a "B" Detachment may have been assigned either to a single Mobile Strike Force Command, or it may have advised in the command of a number of Camp Strike Forces. At the lowest level, the Camp Strike Force

was advised by an "A" Detachment.[18/]

The Commander, 5th SFGA, normally retained full command over certain additional forces based in the vicinity of Nha Trang. The Nha Trang Installation Defense Command (IDC) contained a permanent combat element, A-502, and was normally augmented by the country-wide Mobile Strike Force reserve, advised by Detachment B-55. Detachment B-51 advised the VNSF Training Center at Dong Ba Thin. Project DELTA was advised by Detachment B-52; this latter unit conducted long-range reconnaissance missions to locate enemy units and installations. The 5th SFGA also operated the MACV Recondo School at Nha Trang, which trained personnel in the techniques of the Long-Range Reconnaissance Patrol.[19/]

The USAF had been involved in support of Special Forces since it arrived in Vietnam in November 1961, primarily to provide air firepower in defense of exposed SF camps and to airlift supplies to these remote areas. Beginning in December 1965, the USAF assigned FACs to work directly with the SF reconnaissance team operations. As these operations proved to have a substantial payoff, the USAF contribution was gradually increased and at the end of 1968, plans were afoot to increase the USAF commitment to these highly important operations.

The following chapters of this report cover the USAF role in support of Special Forces in three categories--camp defense, support of ground reconnaissance teams, and airlift of supplies and personnel to camps cut off from ground resupply.

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CHAPTER II

AIR SUPPORT OF CAMP STRIKE FORCES

Support for the defense and evacuation of Civilian Irregular Defense Group camps was a highly important mission of the U.S. Air Force in Vietnam. These camps were placed in a line running roughly north to south, the length of South Vietnam, with the majority near the western border areas. Each was manned by a Camp Strike Force of CIDG with a personnel strength of about 600 people. The vast majority of these camps with their defenders and dependents had to be resupplied by air and when hit by the enemy, they were largely dependent upon fast-reacting air support for survival.

Since 1961, the CIDG camps had been the dominating interest of the Special Forces establishment in Vietnam. The camps were built and maintained in remote areas not suitable for sustained operations by regular forces. They provided bases from which the CIDG forces could launch offensive operations against enemy guerrilla units and from which FWMAF units could launch offensive operations against VC main force and NVA units.

The CIDG program was established in November 1961 under the Combined Studies Division of MAAG, Vietnam. It was designed to develop a counterinsurgency paramilitary force from ethnic minority groups. By mid-1964, there were 25 CIDG camps and in late 1968, there were 64. The number of CIDG personnel had grown from 1,500 in 1961 to 42,000 in December 1968.[1/]

The massive influx of U.S. forces into South Vietnam in 1965 and the establishment of their logistical base changed the whole complexion of the

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Special Forces operation, which had previously concentrated upon purely counterinsurgency-type activities and which had almost exclusive access to the airlift capability of the USAF. The SF operation was adversely affected in terms of logistical procurement and the distribution of supplies and materiel to CIDG camps. For this reason, the 5th SFGA requested an organic aviation unit be programmed to provide the necessary aircraft for airlift. As a result, a direct support CV-2 (Caribou) company was programmed for the Group. There were also advantages to the SF program as a result of the build-up. U.S. engineers were available for the construction of CIDG camps. U.S. forces could engage with CIDG forces in combined operations to clear areas for new camps. More helicopters were available. Also, U.S. forces would be available as reaction forces to relieve camps under attack and exploit opportunities developed by CIDG operations.[2/]

The buildup of airstrike units starting in 1965 also had a payoff to the SF. Whereas in 1963 and 1964, airstrikes were usually only available for pre-strike operations and for about 15 minutes after a landing, in the years after 1965, a far greater amount of air support could be provided even though the SF was in competition with regular conventional forces for this support.[3/] Another advantage of the 1965 buildup was the improvement in psyops support given the 5th SFGA by the 5th Air Commando Squadron with its strategically located U-10s and C-47s.[4/]

A typical CIDG camp in late 1968 consisted of USAF and VNSF "A" Teams, four light infantry companies, a political warfare team, 105-mm howitzer crews, 106 RR sections, airboat platoons, and other special purpose units, as required,

based on the tactical situation and camp location. The goal of Special Forces was to keep at least 50 percent of these people on offensive operations at all times.

The camps were designed so they could be manned by a minimum number of troops. Normally, a "fighting camp" had an outer perimeter of barbed wire, Claymore mines and other barriers, and it housed most of the camp strike forces. An inner perimeter held the key facilities of the camp, including the USAF and VNSF living quarters and teamhouse, command control facilities, most of the heavy organic weapons, and emergency medical, signal, and ammunition bunkers. The camp was compartmentalized so that an enemy penetration of the outer perimeter could be contained.[5/]

The isolated locations of these camps made them vulnerable to attack. In one sense, this vulnerability was intentional as a means of getting the enemy to mass his forces to attack. The 50 percent of the camp personnel out on operations sought to stir up the enemy and get him to expose himself to attack by heavy firepower such as air. Under these conditions, it was of the utmost importance that adequate fire support be provided when the attack came, and that a capability for evacuation in extreme emergency be available. Tactical fighters and tactical airlift had the primary roles in providing this support, and they had to be ready at any time and under any weather conditions. In practically all major attacks upon SF camps, the enemy took advantage of darkness and weather conditions.[6/]

To provide this support, a 7AF Operations Plan (443-68) was prepared in September 1967 and revised in July 1968, to insure that all elements of the

air organization were employed effectively in defense and evacuation of the camps. The plan assigned specific camps to each of the six wings in South Vietnam, as well as the 6th Special Operations Squadron (SOS) of the 14th Special Operations Wing (SOW). These units maintained a current briefing folder on each USAF camp location. Strike pilots were briefed on close air support procedures for the camps, terrain characteristics, defense plans, and extraction plans for camps in high priority threat areas. Pilots periodically overflew their assigned USASF camps in unit aircraft under good weather conditions to familiarize themselves with the sites, surrounding terrain and landmarks, and ordnance delivery procedures.[7/]

The 834th Air Division, under this plan, was to provide a Mission Commander to act as the division representative and control the airlift activities at his assigned location. It also provided a Combat Control Team for communications between the Airlift Control Center (ALCC) and the onload station, to control air traffic and to act as a control tower if required. The 834th also provided a Mobility Team for rapid on-load capability to expedite airlift activities and a Maintenance Team to avoid aircraft being stranded due to maintenance or battle damage. The 834th also prepared and maintained a current briefing folder on each USASF camp assigned for evacuation support.[8/]

The camps themselves, recognizing the involvement of air support in total camp defense, emphasized preparations for air support in their camp hardening programs. Camp detachments were advised to check the location, number, and method for requesting COMBAT SKYSPOT bombing missions. These items were reviewed by the Air Liaison Officer (ALO) and target folders were updated at Hq 7AF. Camps were told to request additional COMBAT SKYSPOT missions to

cover vulnerable flanks, most probable enemy approaches, and suspected assembly areas. They also checked the status of the USAF radar bombing capability and found targets in their particular area of operations. Visits of representatives of the specifically assigned close air support squadron were suggested and the squadron liaison officer made periodic overflights of the camp for familiarization and psychological purposes. All camps were also directed to check the locations, status, and method of requesting flareships Forward Air Controllers (FACs) and AC-47 (Spooky) aircraft.[9/]

Long experience with enemy attacks on SF camps taught the camp defenders lessons about defense during these attacks. Since strikes were expected to be delivered close to the perimeters, overhead shelters for the defenders were strengthened to withstand friendly fire if it came in too close. The SF also discovered that during their attacks on SF installations, enemy troops tried to divert fire from Spooky aircraft by firing sporadically at the plane from areas that appeared to be likely avenues of approach. Seeing the enemy ground fire, the AC-47 pilot would spend much of his time hitting the source of fire, while the main enemy unit might be somewhere else. The SF people also established the fact that the enemy was placing one or two men in covered positions far from their actual withdrawal route, with instructions to fire simply to attract Spooky's attention and divert him from the main enemy force.[10/]

The Special Forces and CIDG personnel in the remote camps developed a high respect for the AC-47s, which were their primary defense during the early morning hours when the enemy usually opened his attacks. The normal pattern for air defense was for Spooky to provide cover during the hours of darkness.

COMBAT SKYSPOT radar strikes were also made at night on preplanned areas. At first light, the FAC would be overhead delivering tactical airstrikes.

Throughout the course of fighting in Vietnam, airpower played a consistently critical role in CIDG camp defense. Previous CHECO reports describe in detail the role of air in the defense of Plei Me in October 1965, A Shau in March 1966, Lang Vei in February 1968, and Kham Duc in May 1968. Little publicized was the role played by air in camp defense during the critical months between December 1964 and mid-1965. This was the period before U.S. ground forces arrived in Vietnam to buttress a crumbling ARVN force; it was a period when the enemy made an almost successful effort to take over the country by dividing it along Route 19 between Pleiku and Qui Nhon. During violent attacks on SF camps at Dong Xoai, Song Be, Ba Gia, and other exposed locations, airpower was practically the only defense available and it took an extremely heavy toll of the enemy. In this critical period, it was the USAF and VNAF, holding the fort until the arrival of U.S. ground forces, which prevented the enemy from taking over the country.

The following paragraphs describe the defense of Thuong Duc and Duc Lap in the fall of 1968. These were typical recent defense actions, which brought the Seventh Air Force camp defense plan into play with considerable success.

Defense of Thuong Duc Special Forces Camp

On 28 September 1968, after several weeks of relative inactivity, enemy forces around Thuong Duc, about 37 kilometers southwest of Da Nang in I Corps, launched a two-regiment attack against the CIDG camp which housed some 400 men. The attack was sudden and determined, prompting the belief that this

was the opening of a new enemy offensive. The opening of the attack on Thuong Duc and a violent enemy reaction to a nearby USMC Operation TALLEDEGA CANYON a week earlier, prompted the CG, III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) to request additional air support in the form of multiple ARC LIGHT missions and increased COMBAT SKYSPOT strikes. There was little hope that the camp could hold out against a determined enemy assault, but all air resources in I Corps were made available in what proved to be an almost classic performance of airpower.

The attack began on the southern perimeter of the camp, which was the westernmost Special Forces outpost in I Corps. Starting at 0230H, recoilless rifle fire and mortar fire began hitting outposts, three of which fell in the first two hours. The enemy overran nearby villages, captured the airstrip serving Thuong Duc, and set up his gun positions on high ground all around the camp. Efforts to retake the outposts failed and the RF/PF force, which made three efforts to clear the village adjacent to the camp, was pinned down when daylight came. At 1230H, after the FAC put in four sorties of "outstanding airstrikes on the OPs," a fourth operation was mounted to retake the enemy-held outposts. Two OPs were retaken and 25 enemy were confirmed KIA with another 35 estimated as killed by air. Forty airstrikes were flown in support of the camp, but by nightfall, the enemy still held all the high ground around the camp and all the villages south and east of the two rivers, which formed a confluence on which the camp was located.[11/]

At 1800H, a Marine FAC arrived with a radar beacon to provide homing instructions for the A-6 sorties which Horn Direct Air Support Center (DASC) had requested be diverted to I Corps. Twenty-two A-6 sorties dropped ordnance

during the night, but enemy rocket and mortar fire continued to pound the camp. Most of the fire was coming from ten positions at the foot of Hill 200, located about 1,500 meters northeast of the camp. At the time, it was estimated two enemy regiments were involved in the assault, with little hope that the camp could be maintained.

Lt. Col. Jimmie K. Self, Chief of the LOPEZ FACs based at Da Nang, arrived on the scene in his O-2 aircraft around 1915 hours and found the camp ablaze with every single building burning. He quickly spotted the positions on Hill 200 where the enemy fire was originating. "They were brazen as hell," he reported later, "walking all around right in the open with lights on all over the place. They just didn't seem to give a damn."

Using two Spooky AC-47 gunships, Colonel Self directed gunfire into the enemy positions, but they seemed to have little effect, probably because the enemy was revetted in anticipation of AC-47 fire. It was obvious that it would take tac air with heavy bombs to get the gun positions, so an immediate request was submitted. Although there was an enemy 37-mm gun on Hill 200 and anti-aircraft fire was coming from all over the hill, Colonel Self figured that if he could keep the enemy's heads down during the half hour until the fighters arrived, he might reduce casualties in the camp from mortar fire. With this in mind, he and his copilot, Capt. Gilbert Schmidt, rolled in for pass after pass, striking at the enemy lights with the O-2s marking rockets. After ten passes, the rockets were used up, and Colonel Self made several more dry runs with his landing lights on. Pulling out at 300 feet, he circled around and buzzed the enemy until the fighters arrived around 1750 hours. The three

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sets of F-100 fighters were on the target in repeated passes until all ordnance was expended. When they had finished at 2005 hours, the enemy fire had stopped and only occasional rounds of rocket fire were placed on Thuong Duc during the remainder of the night.[12/]

The following day, on 29 September, 60 tac air sorties were used to support the heavy action around Thuong Duc and in support of a Mobile Strike Force element, which had been inserted outside the camp and was immediately exposed to heavy enemy fire. The LOPEZ FACs, including Colonel Self, who flew all day on the 29th, joined with the Special Forces' FAC, Lt. Col. Ralph N. Albright, to direct airstrikes against enemy positions around the camp, particularly in the landing zones (LZs) where the MSF relief force had landed. The MSF insertion went smoothly without a single helicopter being downed, and the MSF troops made their way into the camp as reinforcements. Other strikes were used to support what seemed to be a continuous, troops-in-contact (TIC) situation. Aircraft were overhead throughout the daylight hours.[13/]

Enemy pressure continued on the camp as darkness settled in. The controlling agency for airstrikes, Horn DASC, again called in a large number of out-country A-6 sorties for radar drops along with visual drops from in-country based tac air. These strikes were used intermittently along with Spooky AC-47 forays around Thuong Duc and the nearby threatened outpost of Ha Thanh, as a combined attack against both camps was still expected. With the MSF, along with heavy ground weapons, supporting Thuong Duc, the decision was made to defend Ha Thanh entirely by air. There was no doubt that air was successful here, for although the enemy may have had intentions of taking either Ha Thanh

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or Thuong Duc in these initial assaults, he failed to do so.

Pressure by tac air continued for the next ten days, and by means of B-52 ARC LIGHT missions, starting on 28 September, more than 2,500 tons of bombs were dropped in an almost complete circle around the camp. (See Fig. 2.) Between 28 September and 10 October 1968, more than 600 tac air sorties had been delivered around Thuong Duc. On 6 October, a combined ARVN-USMC relief force, composed of seven maneuver battalions, was lifted by helicopters to positions around the camp and began a sweep to clear the enemy-dominated positions threatening the camp. The operation, called MAUI PEAK, ran into considerable opposition on the first day, with one USMC battalion being driven off its landing zone and forced to retire. The ARVN and USMC battalions made heavy contact with the enemy during their sweeps and most of the tactical air support provided since 6 October was directed to the support of these relief ground forces.

Although the ground relief force drove the enemy to positions about five to seven kilometers away from the camp, it was the continuous stream of airstrikes, tac air, B-52, Spooky AC-47, and COMBAT SKYSPOT, that was credited by the Senior U.S. Army Advisor to the Special Forces in I Corps with saving the camp. This officer, Lt. Col. Daniel Connelly, unreservedly lauded the air effort and used the experience at Thuong Duc to argue for a greater FAC capability for his Special Forces company, hoping to raise the strength of his FAC contingent from two to eight people. Some of Colonel Connelly's comments made while the battle was going on are reported here as an example of the customer's viewpoint on air support:[14/]

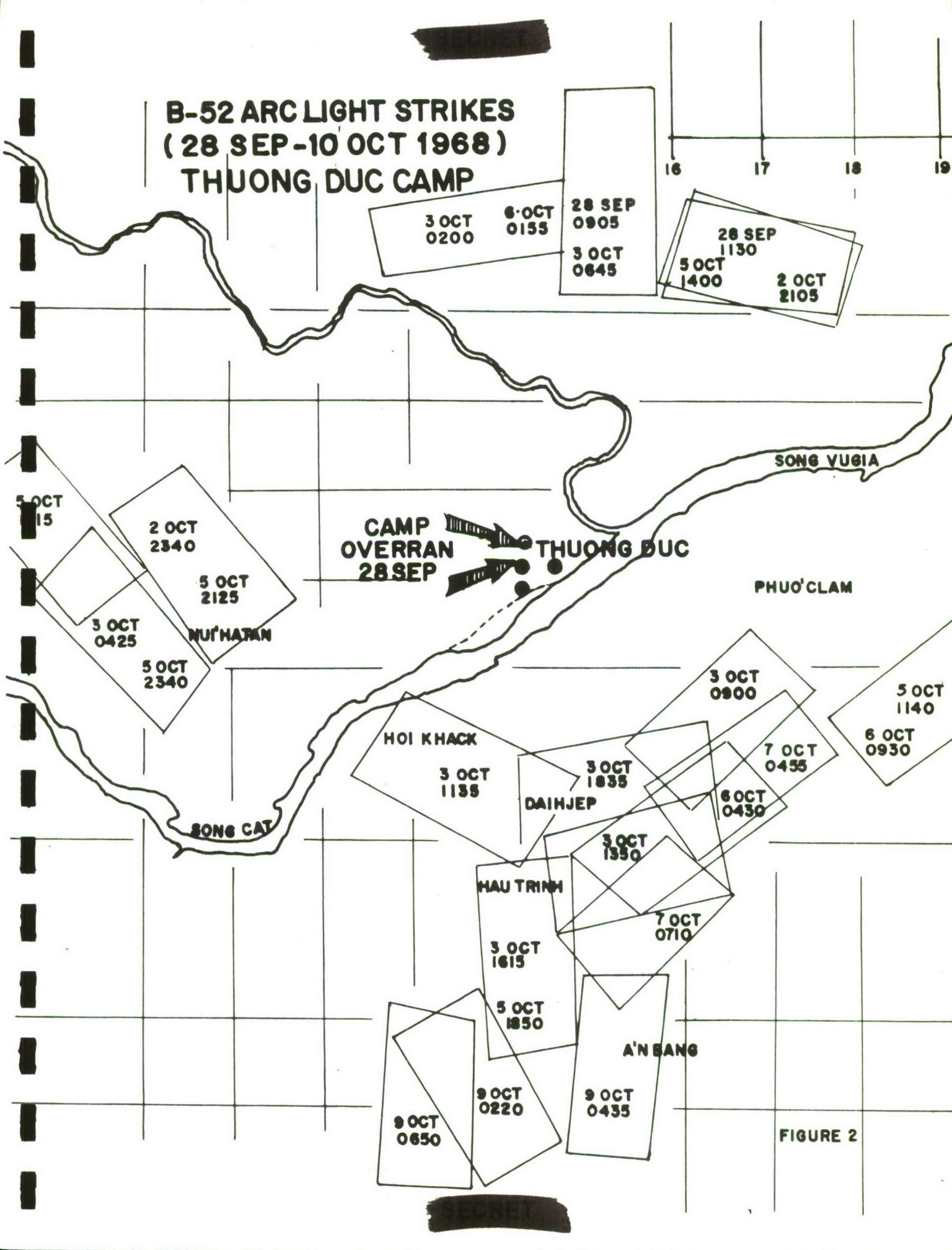
B-52 ARC LIGHT STRIKES
(28 SEP-10 OCT 1968)
THUONG DUC CAMP
16
17
18
19
3 OCT 0200
6 OCT 0155
28 SEP 0905
3 OCT 0645
28 SEP 1130
5 OCT 1400
2 OCT 2105
SONG VUGIA
5 OCT 15
2 OCT 2340
5 OCT 2125
3 OCT 0425
NUI HATAN
5 OCT 2340
CAMP OVERRAN 28 SEP
THUONG DUC
PHUO CLAM
3 OCT 0900
5 OCT 1140
6 OCT 0930
HOI KHACK
3 OCT 1135
3 OCT 1835
DAIHJEP
7 OCT 0455
6 OCT 0430
SONG CAT
3 OCT 1350
HAU TRINH
7 OCT 0710
3 OCT 1615
5 OCT 1850
A'N BANG
9 OCT 0220
9 OCT 0435
9 OCT 0650

FIGURE 2

[redacted]

"...Air saved the camp. There is no doubt about it. Without that support from FACs and fighters, we would not be in Thuong Duc today.

"...We have four strike companies in the camp and that's not enough to keep patrols on the perimeter. There just aren't enough men to keep at all key points in the defense area. We must rely upon our FACs to know what the enemy is up to, particularly in the plateau where he has been dug in for years.

"...I have one critical comment on air, only one. We have to have troops in contact before we get air support. We also had some management problems. Spooky had to leave to allow SKYSPOT bombing and we needed Spooky.

"...The pattern of our operations is fairly constant. We go out with patrols from the camp and try to stir up the enemy. When we do, air hits him. The ALO is always intimately involved in every situation concerning our camps. He's an indispensable part of our operations.

"...Colonel Albright (SF ALO) flew 21 hours out of 36 in those first two days of fighting. He had to...Air is the artillery for the camp. We don't have the organic firepower of conventional units. The biggest factor with us is Spooky at night. He's not available or nearby; he's there on the spot. We use Spooky for any camp under pressure.

"...The FAC is the key link in our operation. Otherwise, we have to spend too much time explaining our situation to the system. He makes it a fast businesslike proposition. It is imperative that the FAC system and its importance to our operations get recognition. Without the FAC, we wouldn't have got 50% of what we got in the way of air.

"...We believe in air, we really do. It's the best thing that ever happened to us. It took us some time to really learn how to use the stuff. The air performance at Thuong Duc was a fantastic show.

"...We have only two dedicated "slicks" (HU-1Bs) for all nine camps in I Corps. This is not enough. I need more air and I need it now.

"...I can't overemphasize the importance of air to this whole SF operation. What happens is the FAC goes out and identifies an enemy location. We probe it and hit him. He hits us back and as soon as we get in proper position, the air clobbers

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[redacted]

him. We've done this time and time again.

"...SKYSPOT is beneficial for us generally. It's a strategic weapon when we are deterring the enemy from a rear area. When he's coming through the wire, SKYSPOT isn't worth a damn. I'm not downgrading SKYSPOT because it's damn good, especially as a beacon. When Charles starts coming through the wire, there is only one thing and that is to put out the fire power and to put it in close and that's Spooky.

"...I don't recall ever being exposed to the type of FAC activity I have here in I Corps. Many of our soldiers coming over here aren't familiar with the FAC and how to use him. Earlier in the game, the FAC was not understood properly.

"...Each of our camps has a company of CIDG people drawn from the population base, either VN or Montagnards. At each one we have a 12-14 man "A" Detachment of USSF. That's a pretty small force considering the amount of ground we're covering. But air is the equalizer.

"...The CIDG was designed to counter the VC, operate in the way he does. We beat them back. We matched the young men of one village against the young men of another. And the CIDGs had the upper hand. But that was in the past. Now, with the NVA in the picture, our M-2 carbines and sneakers aren't enough. Poor communications and language problems put us at a disadvantage. This has made air more important than ever...."

Colonel Connelly's Deputy Commanding Officer, Lt. Col. Maurice Williams, also had some comments on the performance of air at Thuong Duc. Asked what would happen if all nine camps in I Corps were attacked simultaneously, Colonel Williams replied:[15/]

"...If all our camps were hit simultaneously, I expect we would get the same support we got at Thuong Duc. At Thuong Duc, we got 24-hour coverage by FACs and when they needed it, they overlapped. They got there before dark and they flew all night and exchanged crews, information, and anything else, and kept it up all the time. I think

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[redacted]

this could happen with all our camps. I don't know what the capabilities of the support would have been in bad weather, but I think we would have received good support...."

Asked to compare the relative effectiveness of airpower versus the USMC-ARVN ground reinforcements, Colonel Connelly had this to say:[16/]

"...The USMC would rather not be in Thuong Duc right now. They think camps are more trouble than they're worth. However, if you cut them out and go back, all you'll own is the flatlands, the beaches. There's nothing out there but us, and we're too far east. ...We feel that if we find him out here and make him fight here, he won't hit our cities. If it hadn't been for camps like Thuong Duc, Charles would now be in the cities...."

More specific details on the role of airstrikes in the defense of Thuong Duc were provided by U.S. Army 1st Lt. Richard McDonald, who was in the camp throughout the attack. Lieutenant McDonald said:[17/]

"...Without the continuous air support around Thuong Duc, the camp would have fallen. One specific instance; the market place north of the camp was occupied by a reinforced platoon of NVA soldiers. The District Chief had cleared out all civilians in the area and they attacked first with Regional and Popular Force soldiers. These were turned back with heavy casualties and from there, they asked the camp to fire on the market place with 106-mm recoilless rifle rounds. After 53 rounds were fired, the RF/PF tried again to sweep the area and they were again swept back. Finally, airstrikes were called in on the village. The village was mostly concrete houses with tile roofs and some houses had tin roofs. The airstrikes were effective in that not one of the NVA soldiers escaped from the marketplace as far as we can ascertain. When the RF/PF finally did sweep the market place, they found 40 to 50 bodies and pieces of bodies...The village was completely destroyed but the NVA in the village who were in the trenches and in the concrete houses were completely annihilated.

[redacted]

"...The airstrikes also played a big role in re-capture of the two outposts that were overrun. Units that tried to re-take them had been repulsed, but after the airstrikes, the outposts were re-captured with very few friendly casualties...."

The experience at Thuong Duc stood out in sharp contrast to the attack on the Special Forces Camp of Kham Duc in May 1968. There was never any intention of evacuating Thuong Duc, according to Colonel Connelly: "We have our own Special Forces orientation now that says we will not evacuate any more camps. If we gave up Thuong Duc, it would belong to Charles and he's already within 37 kilometers of Da Nang." He added further:[18/]

"...There's an auxiliary reason for our being there and that's to provide for the protection of the people and extend the influence of the government of Vietnam. Evacuating that camp is just out of the question, and it's not necessary either. We proved it with that air thing...."

In the case of Thuong Duc, evacuation would have been almost impossible even if it had been directed. The airstrip was captured on the first day of the enemy attack, and the camp defenders were pinned down in their bunkers as an almost continuous stream of enemy mortar and rocket fire was poured in. According to the I Corps SF company commander, the decision to evacuate would have had to come before the situation became critical. In other words, once the battle was joined, the camp was almost completely reliant upon air support in the critical days before major ground units could come in to reinforce. From the time of the initial enemy attack on Thuong Duc on 28 September, until the launching of the joint USMC-ARVN ground relief operation on 6 October,

more than a week had elapsed. Colonel Connelly had approached the Marines for help and they wanted to participate on a large scale, which required planning time. It was up to the Special Forces themselves to hold the camp until help arrived and air support was critical to that mission. As was proved at both A Shau and Kham Duc, the first two days of an attack were the decisive period, and whether the camp could be held depended upon its resistance during those initial days.

Based on the reality of the defense of Thuong Duc, Colonel Connelly began pressing for a greater integral FAC capability for I Corps. He wanted five FACs and three airplanes at Chu Lai, and three FACs and two airplanes at Da Nang. He felt these resources should be dedicated to the Special Forces commander and responsive to his requirements. "Up here," he said, "we are intimately familiar with the area and the FACs should also be intimately familiar with the area." He felt that with nine camps to defend, more flexibility could be realized by shifting his FAC assets to meet any situation which might develop. "This would not put a strain on other people or pull in people who are unfamiliar with the area or the operation," he said. He added:[19/]

> *"...There's a problem of communications when you are dealing with outside agencies such as the Marines. Once Charles gets in here, it's a case of 'Katy, bar the door' unless somebody really has good control over the situation. If you want to put a strike in a specific area, you may not have time to request it while you're being mortared from here and there.*
>
> *"...Then there's the problem of who controls the ground and who says we will or will not go in there. We set up an area a click and a half radius around the camp as*

a no-strike zone to permit the people to work in their area, but I think this operation showed the necessity for an overall air control agency to coordinate and say that this air belongs to these people."

The "C" Company ALO pointed out one of the difficulties which arose when there were no clear-cut ground rules for camp defense:[20/]

"...I was waiting to put in a strike the other day on an enemy position when I noticed a Marine FAC putting in a strike close by. I had no communication with him so I had to wait until they were done. I put my F-4s in on the target. At the same time, a Lopez FAC was waiting here for me to finish my strikes so he could put his strikes in. The people in the camp were trying to contact him to tell him the VNAF were going to come into that same area and to watch out. So we were up there like a daisy chain--no communication and lack of control."

The Special Forces Commander in I Corps (Colonel Connelly) firmly believed his ALO should be the man to do the controlling of airstrikes in defense of a camp, regardless of who came in. He was referring to the takeover of operational control of the Thuong Duc area by the USMC with the onset of Operation MAUI PEAK on 6 October. When the Marines assumed control of the area around Thuong Duc, there was an initial period of confusion. For example, while over Thuong Duc, a FAC aircraft had dropped its smoke and the pilot was getting ready to bring in the fighters, when a USMC OV-10 dropped another smoke rocket only 200 meters away. The USAF fighters had to be called off, and contact made with the ground control unit to coordinate with the Marine FAC.

There were several advantages to having a Special Forces' FAC in control of the area around the camp, according to Colonel Connelly. Foremost, of

course, the FAC assigned to Special Forces, with a knowledge of their ground operations, was in the best position to know how to support them. For example, a Marine FAC or a LOPEZ (ARVN) FAC, would come in over Hill 200 and see the enemy digging in and assume that he had a good target. What he did not know was that the USASF-led CIDG people were in there for weeks blowing out the enemy as fast as he was digging in. Another advantage was that the SF FAC could better understand the language and mentality of the indigenous Special Forces troops on the ground. Colonel Albright, for example, knew that in some cases, particular units were prone to ask for a lot more air than they needed, simply because they assumed they would get less than they asked for. Also, there was the old argument that a FAC who knows the particular terrain and the modus operandi of unconventional friendly forces is in the best position to support them.[21/]

The basic lesson learned at Thuong Duc was one that had been repeated time and time again throughout the fighting in Vietnam. An exposed camp surrounded by enemy troops provides the best targets for air when the enemy decides to close in, particularly if plans are made in advance to employ this air effectively. This was the case in the early days of the attack against Thuong Duc and the results were exceptionally gratifying.

Although Thuong Duc provided a dramatic example of air support in Special Force Camp defense, there were many others which also demonstrated the cruciality of air support during attack situations. Whether by design or by evolution, the SF camps served to entice the enemy to attack and caused him to mass his forces. At Thuong Duc, the CIDGs in the camp deliberately stirred up

the enemy. Completely surrounded by enemy controlled areas, they constantly went out on patrols, looking, fighting when the opposing force was local and small, and calling for help when they ran into a larger enemy force. According to Colonel Connelly, the policy after the attack on Thuong Duc was to go out and stir the enemy up again, to goad him toward another vulnerable exposure. It was also Colonel Connelly's opinion that this policy could be carried out with far greater confidence if the SF had dedicated FACs.[22/]

Battle of Duc Lap

The attack on the Special Forces Camp at Duc Lap in II Corps occurred on 23-28 August 1968, a month before the attack on Thuong Duc. The plan for air support of Special Forces camps under attack was implemented during the enemy assault on the Duc Lap camp, beginning at 0105 hours on 23 August. After almost a week of very poor weather, consisting of low clouds and rain, the enemy had decided to move against this camp. Opening with B-40 rockets, 122-mm rockets, and 60-mm and 82-mm mortars, the enemy launched a determined ground assault. Fortunately for the defenders, the weather cleared on 23 August, the day of the attack, and remained clear for the next six days, allowing effective airstrikes.[23/]

The disposition of enemy antiaircraft guns around the camp during the attack indicated that the enemy was familiar with aircraft approach routes. These positions were in place and ready when the strike planes came in and, as with other attacks, the ground assault was linked with this capability to try and counter airstrikes. During the night of the first assault, Spooky gunship support was overhead and continuous. By 0900 the next morning, a FAC

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from Ban Ma Thuot was overhead and airstrikes were called in to the immediate area around the camp. These strikes were continuous throughout the siege. Initially, the fighters concentrated on the enemy occupied villages around Duc Lap and later, were shifted to targets of opportunity throughout the area.[24/]

Enemy gunfire on the camp continued through daylight hours for the first few days and by 24 August, the enemy had occupied a key hill outpost and was threatening to take the main hill overlooking the camp. Tac air support during the first three days was almost continuous. Spookies and the FAC were up all night and the FAC was overhead all day. The FACs, in addition to guiding tac air, provided visual reconnaissance (VR), served as artillery observers, and furnished radio relay. On several occasions during the first three days, the enemy was stopped at the perimeter of the camp by Spooky gunships, tac air, and artillery. At dusk, on 26 August, battalion-sized reinforcements came into the camp and for all practical purposes, the siege was lifted.

During the period 23-31 August, the USAF flew 314 tac air sorties and nine ARC LIGHT missions in support of the camp. In this period of little more than a week, 715 enemy were killed and 7 captured. Friendly casualties were 114 KIA, 283 WIA, and 3 MIA.

A key lesson learned during the Duc Lap attack was the confirmation of the importance of Spooky to camp defense. Spooky support was considered timely and effective, and during the critical night and early morning periods, was almost solely responsible for keeping off the attackers.

After Duc Lap, the Special Forces offered a possible explanation for the

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enemy's always launching his main assaults at dawn because he made an easy target, and the FAC and airstrikes worked best in daylight. It was in this critical, short period of transition that the enemy, according to the Special Forces, believed he had the best chance of penetrating the perimeters of the camp.

The Camp Commander at Duc Lap, 1st Lt. William J. Harp, commented on the air support received during the enemy attack:[25/]

> *"...We received great support. We would call the FAC and the bombs would be dropping every 15 minutes. The first strike might take 30 minutes. They would come in three sets of two. When the third pair was done, another three would be stacked up. We had FAC all day and Spooky all night. We always had two Spookys on call. The gunships also helped a lot...."*

There was general agreement among all Army personnel in the battle that air support was decisive, and this was reflected in the official After Action Report. The report stated that without air support, the siege of Duc Lap would certainly have had a different ending. The general opinion was summed up by Maj. James Crysel, S-3 for Special Forces Operating Base (SFOB), who said, "In my opinion, those airstrikes kept the camp from being overrun. Those F-100s and Phantoms were really outstanding."[26/] During the four days of heavy fighting, four AH-1G gunships, two Huey "slicks" and an F-100 were shot down over Duc Lap.

Future Plans for CIDG Program

The main structure of the Special Forces was formed by the establishment and maintenance of CIDG camps in remote areas, generally near the borders. In

1968, there were 64 of these camps dedicated primarily to the interdiction of VC/NVA routes and base areas. The line of border camps was planned to enhance the post-hostilities posture of the Vietnamese Government as they could be converted to the Vietnamese border police organization. The line of camps also marked the outpost line of resistance for the ARVN and FWMAF during active hostilities. Wherever regular forces took over, the Special Forces planned to close down their camps.[27/]

A continuing goal of Special Forces was to observe the principle of mass and economy of force by placing camps in critical areas in a coordinated system to promote mutual support and present an integrated barrier to the enemy. In the III Corps, it was found that the normal enemy trails for infiltrating toward the Saigon-Bien Hoa area ran between the artillery fans of the camps. It was in these areas that air support was often required when SF patrols located enemy movement.[28/] In the III Corps area, the air support to Special Forces was considered excellent largely because of the proximity of air bases. When the enemy struck many camps simultaneously, as he did during the last months of 1968, when camps like Kontam were being shelled daily, there was a problem of immediate response. COMUSMACV at that time instructed the CG, II Field Force that "you will not let Special Forces go down the drain." Air support was planned to prevent this from ever happening.

The trend toward "fighting camps" was continued throughout 1968. These camps were established at low cost to accomplish the mission in 10 to 18 months' time and then be closed or converted. Camps were built and plans were in effect for coping with a VC reversion to Phase II operations of guerrilla

warfare. It was also planned to accomplish all missions with the minimum CIDG forces required even though there were problems in recruiting CIDG personnel for the camps in existence.

One of the major goals in 1968 was to bring the CIDG troops under the direct control of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) and eliminating the CIDG as a separate U.S. sponsored military force. During 1968, four CIDG camps were converted to Regional Force status in a move toward achieving this goal.[29/]

These efforts to integrate the CIDG program into the RVNAF were less than successful. One of the reasons was that the CIDG mission was offensive, while the RF/PF mission was defensive. The camps converted in 1968 did not have enough qualified people to continue the program. Also, the Mobile Strike Forces were composed mostly of ethnic minority which normally did not trust the Vietnamese. Further, there were difficulties in getting the VNSF to accompany the MSF on combat operations.

Air support of Special Forces Camps continued to be a matter of importance to their continued effectiveness. Headquarters MACV, after the attack on Thuong Duc in October 1968, anticipated the intensity of such attacks would be increased as the enemy sought a much-needed psychological victory. This he could obtain by overrunning a camp, as he did at A Shau in March 1966 and Kham Duc in May 1968. COMUSMACV was concerned about the danger of adverse weather over a camp for a two-or-three-day period, which would deny air support to a camp under attack. Under these conditions, if a camp were not reinforced, it would probably fall. Citing this danger, COMUSMACV emphasized

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to all commands in SVN that the defense of these camps and their reinforcement was critical in order to deny the enemy this psychological victory. Further, he advised that presence of the enemy in the area of CIDG camps provided the Allies a target for offensive action which should not be lost.[30/]

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CHAPTER III

AIR SUPPORT OF MOBILE STRIKE FORCES

Prior to early 1964, the Special Forces operation in South Vietnam was centered around 40 CIDG camps, the mission of which has been described in the preceding chapter. The patrols conducted by USASF personnel working with trained indigenous forces included various covert operations, but these were not conducted under a formal organizational cover.

In May 1964, Project DELTA (originally LEAPING LENA) was initiated on a formalized basis to locate enemy units, gather information, direct artillery, and tac air, and conduct bomb damage assessment. Project personnel also acted as hunter-killer teams, conducted search and destroy operations on limited targets, carried out special purpose raids, reinforced "A" Detachments and other units, harassed the enemy and served as cover and deception for operations. The long-range interdiction and reconnaissance missions of Project DELTA were initially confined to I Corps and IV Corps. There were 12 US/VN recon teams assigned to Project DELTA along with the 91st Airborne Ranger Battalion. Assignments were provided jointly by MACV and the Vietnamese Joint General Staff (JGS), and the teams were placed under the operational control of a specified Vietnamese Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ)--in the case of DELTA, I Corps, and IV Corps. The DELTA teams could operate for 30 days with 5-7 days rest between operations. Command and control of Project DELTA was assigned to an element called Detachment B-52.[1/]

The successful operation of the Project DELTA concept led to the formation

of Project OMEGA and Project SIGMA in mid-1966, both based on the same format as DELTA. These projects were made up of USASF and Mike Forces personnel, so there was no need for obtaining ARVN/JGS concurrence on operations. The projects were commanded by the Commander, 5th Special Forces Group. In the case of Project OMEGA (which consisted of eight teams, three commando companies, and one Camp Security Company), operational control was assigned to the CG, I Field Force, who could pass control to an U.S. Division command. Project OMEGA provided a long-range reconnaissance capability for II Corps.

Project SIGMA was also composed of eight teams, three commando companies, and one Camp Security Company, and like Project OMEGA, the USASF/Mike Force composition meant that ARVN/JCS concurrence was not required. SIGMA was commanded by the Commander, 5th Special Forces, but operational control was given to the CG, II Field Force, who could pass control to Division level. This provided the LRRP capability for III Corps. Both SIGMA and OMEGA teams could operate in the field for 20 days with 5-7 days rest periods.

Air support for Project DELTA was controlled by the USAF ALO/FAC assigned to the project, who had an O-1E aircraft assigned. For OMEGA and SIGMA, the appropriate Field Force commander was responsible for providing air support, to include at least one FAC with an O-1E aircraft. Tac air, of course, would be provided through the respective DASC within 30 minutes of a request.

On 1 November 1967, the operational control of OMEGA and SIGMA was transferred from the Field Force commanders to MACV's Studies and Observation Group (MACSOG). Prior to the transfer, in August 1967, Detachment B-36 was

established to fill the gap in the strategic and tactical reconnaissance capability of II and III Corps Tactical Zones resulting from the impending transfers. To do this, they used LRRP assets from each Brigade and Division-sized unit in the Corps as augmentation.

A new concept of Special Forces operations was initiated on 1 August 1965 when the Mike Force was established. The basic Mike Force unit was an 150-man company organized and equipped to provide maximum flexibility. As the Mike Force proved its effectiveness, MF companies were authorized for each of the four USASF companies, so that every Corps would have a reaction force and be able to reinforce CIDG camps. The Mike Force proved to be a more mobile and effective force than the Camp Strike Forces because its personnel were better led, airborne qualified, higher paid, and better trained and equipped than the CSF personnel. Also, the force was made up primarily of ethnic groups with a reputation for fierceness as fighters; e.g., the Nungs, Montagnards, and Cambodians.[2/] One of the many demonstrations of the Mike Force effectiveness came in November 1966 when the IV Corps Mike Force rended ineffective a VC battalion in a battle at Soui Da which eventually developed into Operation ATTLEBORO.[3/]

The continued expansion of the Special Forces operation led to the formation of a Mobile Guerrilla Force (MGF) in August 1966. The mission of the MGF was to deploy into VC-dominated areas, establish a series of secret patrol bases, and conduct border surveillance and interdiction of enemy forces and installations in the assigned Area of Operation (AO). The Mobile Guerrilla Force, which was composed of USASF "A" detachments and Mike Force soldiers,

was designed as an "economy of force" effort intended to project into remote areas not under ARVN/FWMAF, CIDG surveillance.[4/] The basic organization of the MGF was the same as the Mike Force--150 personnel--but a 34-man Combat Reconnaissance Platoon (CRP) was added as an organic unit to give the MGF added flexibility. The CRP deployed in advance of the MGF to provide reconnaissance, establish an initial supply point, and gather intelligence. This basic organization of the MGF allowed it to operate with minimal outside support.

On 10 October 1967, it was decided to consolidate the Mike Force and the Mobile Guerrilla Force into a unit known as the Mobile Strike Force (MSF). However, both missions and capabilities were retained in the new organization. At the same time, VNSF personnel were integrated and a joint VNSF/USASF command of the MSF was established.[5/] The integration of the VNSF into the MSF command structure resulted in a general deterioration of the effectiveness of the MSF. This was because: (1) the ethnic minority members of the MSF distrusted the Vietnamese; (2) there was a lack of qualified leaders in the VNSF ranks; and (3) the VNSF often refused to accompany the MSF on combat operations.[6/]

In 1968, the MSF consisted of 47 companies of 184 personnel each, including the organic 34-man Combat Reconnaissance Platoon (CRP) attached to each company. In addition to the CRP, each company had three rifle platoons and a weapons platoon. Starting in 1968, the MSF soldiers were being armed with M-16 rifles and M-60 machine guns to replace the old carbines and .30 caliber light machine guns. The addition of these new weapons produced a more confident and effective soldier as was evidenced in the outstanding performance of the MSF during the Tet Offensive. However, it was recognized by the 5th Special

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Forces Group that the key to the success of the long-range reconnaissance operations was Air Force and Army Aviation augmentation. Without these assets, most of the reconnaissance operations would be almost totally ineffective.[7/]

USAF Involvement in SF Recon Operations

Recognizing the potential of Project DELTA for producing targets for air missions, it was decided in mid-December 1965 to assign USAF FACs to Project DELTA (B-52). The FACs could also help reduce the reaction time for helping teams in trouble. The FACs would be assigned to the Special Forces units to direct airstrikes on acquired targets and assist in exfiltration of teams in trouble, provide fixes for the ground teams, and provide radio relay.[8/]

The two FACs assigned initially to this project in December 1965 received extensive briefings at Nha Trang, and actually went out on ground operations to become thoroughly familiar with the problems faced by the DELTA teams. Army AM radios were modified and aircraft were equipped with them, so that pilot and observer could communicate with ground teams. This early training period included various target marking techniques as well as procedures for directing airstrikes.[9/]

In the first operation (MALLET), employing USAF FACs assigned to the participating DELTA teams in early 1966, notable success was achieved. The operation was designed to clear Highway 15 from Bien Hoa to Vung Tau, and nine DELTA teams were employed to look for enemy units or installations with the goal of acquiring targets for air, artillery, and troop exploitation. The two USAF FACs used the operation to determine a technique for marking targets for airstrikes, which could be adapted for use by all recon teams and to

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establish procedures for directing a FAC aircraft into the target area. On two occasions during this operation, the coordinated ground-air effort was instrumental in saving the lives of eight recon personnel and accounted for an estimated 45 enemy KBA. On another occasion, the immediate response of the FAC and his confidence in the recon team's ability to direct him into the target area resulted in an estimated 15 KBA. After this operation, it was definitely determined the USAF FAC contingent did an outstanding job, and that reaction time for airstrikes and emergency use of helicopters was reduced significantly under the new organizational structure.[10/]

The second military action using FACs with DELTA teams was Operation MASHER, which occurred also in early 1966. Three recon teams were employed during it to find the enemy and bring firepower to bear on him. Again, the FACs proved extremely valuable. Since this was the first operation with USAF participation which involved infiltration and exfiltration by helicopter, it provided an excellent opportunity to further develop procedures for the FAC-Special Forces joint operation.[11/]

On 27 January, the first day of Special Forces involvement, the two USAF FACs arrived early at the jump-off base to arrange for immediate fighter support and establish communications for immediate responses. The teams were infiltrated into their assigned areas at dusk on the 27th and early on the 28th. Despite low ceilings and poor visibility, a FAC was airborne and in radio contact with all three teams. Shortly after noon, Team 1 reported it was compromised and requested exfiltration. Helicopters were scrambled, while the FAC tried to locate the team. Although the team leader believed that

weather would make exfiltration impossible, the FAC located the team and arranged its extraction. The FAC at this time had radio contact with Team 2 but had lost it with Team 3 as night approached.[12/]

On 29 January, there had been no contact with Team 3 for 24 hours, and the FAC continued his search despite the fact that ceilings were lower than the day before. Radio trouble forced the FAC to land, but while he was down, he scrambled an AC-47 to act as radio relay. Team 2 then reported that it had been ambushed and that all personnel were dead or wounded.

The 1st Air Cav then diverted an airborne FAC to the area while the grounded DELTA FAC managed to borrow an O-1E from the Airborne Brigade and get into the air again. Weather precluded an airstrike, but the FAC directed rockets and artillery from the 1st Cav on the target. With ceilings down to 300-500 feet, the two FACs controlled the suppression of enemy fire and the extraction of the hard-hit team. This called for careful and exact coordination under extremely hazardous flying conditions. Four of the team members had been killed in the enemy ambush, but there was no doubt that the remaining two were saved by the coordinated efforts of the FACs and helicopter pilots. Later in the day, after continued failure to make radio contact with Team 3, the FAC sighted panels laid out by the team. Helicopters were brought in by the FAC and two members were exfiltrated. They reported that their team had also been ambushed and split up, with all radios lost. Extremely poor weather continued into the next day, 30 January, but another team member was picked up.[13/]

Search operations for the lost team continued on 31 January, with the

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O-1s and helicopters receiving ground fire while searching at low level. An airstrike was requested on the area of ground fire, but 1st Air Cav refused the request. However, the 22d ARVN Division ALO obtained a flight of VNAF A-1Hs which expended on the target, destroying six structures and killing five enemy. For the remainder of the operation, search efforts proved futile and the remaining three team members were listed as missing in action.

Because of poor weather conditions, the compromise of ground teams, and the difficulty in obtaining airstrikes, only one flight of fighters expended during the entire operation. The FACs' job was more oriented to search and rescue and because of this, several men were saved. However, Operation MASHER did further the development of teamwork between the ground teams and the airborne FAC and it also reconfirmed the extreme value of DELTA-assigned FACs.

Shortly after this operation, the FACs along with the DELTA organization, prepared for an operation under control of I Field Force Vietnam, which would put it in a TAOR north of Ban Me Thuot. The objective was to conduct reconnaissance in Darlac, Pleiku, and Phu Bon Provinces for signs of enemy activity. The FACs conducted aerial reconnaissance and found areas where the recon teams could be employed, and on 7 March, three teams were infiltrated without incident. In this operation, a new concept was being employed for the first time. This was the "Roadrunner" concept, which employed teams of indigenous personnel dressed, armed, and equipped like VC or NVA, who infiltrated into enemy-controlled areas at first light. The teams then moved along pre-selected routes throughout the day until reaching an extraction LZ. Pick-ups were scheduled for the same day the team was landed. If the "Roadrunner" teams

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spotted significant enemy activity, airstrikes, artillery, and ground forces were committed. On 9 March, three "Roadrunner" teams were infiltrated into operational areas.

The following day on 10 March 1966, the DELTA forward operating base (FOB) was advised by 5th SFGA headquarters to immediately extract all DELTA assets from the area and to prepare for a new mission. The Special Forces Camp at A Shau in I Corps was under attack and the DELTA force was to support the defense and relief of the camp. By 1400H on 11 March, all DELTA assets were assembled at the FOB, with the exception of two Roadrunner personnel who were missing in action. Before the operation was terminated, 25 lucrative enemy targets had been located by the teams and these were turned over to the local sector ALO for destruction.

The attack on the Special Forces Camp at A Shau has already been documented in a CHECO report. This camp fell on 11 March, well before the DELTA Force could reach it. However, the DELTA assets did go to Hue - Phu Bai on 12 March and for the next two days, worked with I Corps and the 1st Air Cav to coordinate communications and air requests. This preoperation coordination by the FACs, with the Army Division in whatever area it happened to be working, and with the ALO assigned to the Division, was an essential element in FAC support for the DELTA teams.

On 15 March, three recon teams were ready for infiltration into the A Shau area but the first helicopter carrying the teams crashed after being hit by heavy enemy ground fire. A rescue helicopter rescued all team members but two Vietnamese fell off the helicopter at an altitude of 500-700 feet. The

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FAC scrambled to destroy the first helicopter but this was canceled by the Vietnamese commander who felt the two Vietnamese might still be alive. Three teams managed to get in on 17 March but no targets were discovered and they were exfiltrated on 20 March. Airstrikes were used during the next few days in preparation of landing zones. During a night infiltration of a prepared LZ on 24 March, another helicopter was shot down. All personnel were evacuated, but the helicopters were receiving ground fire from ridges around the area. Two airstrikes were requested by radar bombing but were not received, due to the request being lost between I Corps and the Marine TPQ Center. The following day, strikes were directed into the downed helicopter area and on a target located by one of the ground teams. When the FAC arrived, the enemy ground fire was shifted from the DELTA team to the FAC, who brought a flight of fighters in, which killed an estimated 20 of the enemy.

The FAC played a key role in the extraction of one ground team which could not be picked up on 26 March as scheduled due to poor weather conditions. While attempting to reach the recon team in low-ceiling weather on the 27th, the FAC suffered minor cuts in the face as his aircraft was hit in the windshield. Since the Army Otter, which was also to help, had been grounded for maintenance, the FAC continued to fly radio relay and search until the missing team was found and extracted.

One of the primary lessons learned in these early operations with USAF FACs was the importance of communications with Air Force support facilities. Land lines often had to be used to contact the Division for fighters. The land lines were undependable and delays resulted. The DELTA teams were

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assigned to areas under the control of conventional elements, either U.S. or Vietnamese, and this meant they had to work within the conventional communications system and under the organizational rules of the conventional unit. Although the preoperation coordination with the unit resolved many of the difficulties of communications, some nevertheless continued. By nature of its mission, the Delta Force and its FACs had to be prepared to operate with any conventional unit. One month, it might be with the U.S. 4th Infantry Division in II Corps, the next with the Marines in I Corps, and then with an ARVN Division in III Corps. The ease with which the FAC could adapt to any organization and still provide air support was due in large part to the centralized organization of the Tactical Air Control System. With ALO/FACs spread throughout Vietnam, there was always available an entry into the system.

The Special Forces learned several lessons in the early stages of DELTA operations on the relationship of teams to airstrikes. They felt that teams could remain in an area during an airstrike, if they could keep contact with a FAC. Air Force bombings, the Special Forces personnel said, were ineffective unless directed from the ground or by a FAC who could see the target. Also reconnaissance teams could not be employed effectively without American advisers, because of the inability of the Vietnamese to direct airstrikes by American-flown planes.[14/]

The ALO of II Corps, Lt. Col. O. O. Scroggin, considered the joint informal evolvement of Special Forces-FAC tactics one of the major developments of 1966. This allowed the SF to cope successfully with enemy forces

in number. Colonel Scroggin said most of the major battles in the Highlands occurred when the CIDG found the enemy. Screening of the border by CIDG forces, with II Corps FACs flying in support, resulted in several engagements which the CIDG were able to sustain, until large numbers of the 4th Division's regular troops could be committed.[15/]

The airborne FAC proved to be the eyes and ears of the Special Forces long-range reconnaissance teams. Commanders of these teams, when extremely hard pressed by multiple coordinated VC attacks in jungle areas, where heavy vegetation limited their vision, had turned over control of the battle to the airborne FAC. They considered him the only individual who could see relative positions of the friendly and enemy troops, the usable routes of attack or retreat, and the scheme of maneuver being employed by the enemy.[16/]

Occasionally on these long-range patrols, the Air Force FACs would control the Army helicopter gunships supporting these missions. Normally, one or more helicopter gunship accompanied the teams as an integral element, just as the FACs did. Since the success, if not survival, of the teams depended upon the close mutual support and coordination of every member, a high degree of cooperation between the USAF/Army aviation elements of the Special Forces missions was absolutely essential.

During a special relief and rescue mission in II Corps between 7-14 January 1967, the FAC played a critical role by providing the link-up between the relief force and the besieged force. This was one of the special techniques practiced by FACs in coordination with 5th SFGA Long-Range Reconnaissance

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teams. It was also taught in the MACV Long-Range Ground Reconnaissance (RECONDO) School at Nha Trang. The school was operated under COMUSMACV auspices by the 5th SFGA. The ALO to the 5th SFGA and his FACs closely collaborated with the 5th SFGA staff personnel in development of the curriculum, and they actively participated in classroom and field training exercises.

Such was the relationship between 7AF and the 5th Special Forces Group that it was described by Army personnel as the "special 7AF/5SF partnership." Operational thinking in the 5th SFGA in 1967 was influenced by the high degree of success enjoyed in operations employing USAF personnel. The Special Forces people envisioned the partnership as one in which their long-range reconnaissance teams would penetrate remote areas considered as "safe areas" by the VC, "sniffing out" and flushing the VC from their hide-outs into the open, and then calling in 7AF tactical air to destroy them. The Special Forces in March 1967 specifically designed an operation entirely around this concept, plainly stating it in their mission directive.[17/]

The availability of a FAC over areas being reconnoitered by the Special Forces teams proved vital on several occasions. On 3 May 1966, for example, a FAC (Viper 5) was on a normal visual reconnaissance mission near Loc Ninh, when the USASF advisor on a recon mission reported that his unit had made heavy contact with the enemy. He added that he was unsure of his position and needed airstrikes to keep his company from being overrun. This was at 1650 hours in the afternoon. While waiting for the planes to arrive, the FAC determined the exact position of the recon team (41 Alpha), which proved to be XU810071. This was done by flying rather low over the battle scene and

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determining friendly positions by sound, radio contact, and colored smoke. Because of heavy vegetation, ground smoke was ineffective but Viper 5 felt he had enough information to bring in airstrikes.[18]

By 1700 hours, the USASF adviser reported his situation as desperate, and the FAC made several medium altitude passes over the VC positions which were located west of the friendly positions. He succeeded in getting the enemy fire diverted in part to his aircraft. The FAC also directed 41 Alpha to a suitable landing zone about 1100 meters to the east of their position. The first flights of fighters arrived at 1705 hours and were used in very close support of 41 Alpha, striking as close as 40 meters to allow the trapped unit to conduct an orderly retreat.

Viper 5 had to land for rearming and refueling and his place was taken at 1745 hours by another FAC, Viper 9, who happened to be airborne in the Song Be area, a short distance away. After a quick briefing, Viper 9 picked up the task of directing the fighters in attacks on the enemy positions. Just before dark, at around 1815 hours, Viper 5 returned to the battle area and was advised that VNAF medevac helicopters had been alerted to resupply 41 Alpha and pick up the wounded. Because he had previous experience with VNAF medevacs, Viper 5 left the last airstrikes to Viper 9 and returned to Loc Ninh to arrange the aerial resupply to 41 Alpha.[19]

At 1845 hours, Viper 5 departed Loc Ninh with his aircraft door removed and 87 pounds of ammunition in the rear seat. Returning to the battle scene just as Viper 9 was beginning his last strike, Viper 5 flew under the strike area to the landing zone where 41 Alpha was waiting and made a below-treetop

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delivery to the friendlies. Viper 5, shuttling between Loc Ninh and the battle area, made two more drops of 174 pounds and 100 pounds, the latter containing medical supplies and flares. These drops were made just before darkness and in deteriorating weather, but Viper 5 considered the risk justifiable, as it was apparent the VNAF helicopters would be too late to help evacuate the wounded. In fact, the helicopters never did arrive and the wounded had to be carried to a road where they were evacuated by truck.[20/]

The one hour fire fight, which the two FACs supported, resulted in four CIDG wounded, one killed, and an estimated 15 VC killed and ten wounded. In a letter to the III Corps ALO, the 5th Division (ARVN) ALO, noted the performance of Viper 5 (Captain Brubeck) and Viper 9 (Lieutenant Kaiser) prevented the friendly CIDG unit from being overrun and from experiencing far greater casualties.[21/]

Not all the DELTA operations produced dramatic results. In fact, it was not unusual for a 30-day operation to result in only minimum contact. However, the intent of the operations was to keep the enemy stirred up, to find his hiding places, bring strike power against him, and to gather intelligence. In these terms, the operations could all be considered effective. A recent operation, selected at random, points out the rather routine development of a Special Forces situation. This was Operation ALAMO, carried out during the period 30 August to 30 September 1968 in an area about 70 miles due north of Saigon near the Cambodian border. The operation used 12 US/VN recon teams and 12 Roadrunner teams. Also involved were a CIDG Nung Security company, a bomb damage assessment platoon, part of an assault helicopter company, an

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ARVN Airborne Battalion, and an USAF TACP.[22]

The teams and supporting elements were moved in 24 lifts from Nha Trang to Quan Loi, the forward operating base, from 26 August to 30 August, when the FOB became operational. On the morning of 31 August, two Roadrunner teams were inserted into specified areas and were extracted that evening when two Recon teams were infiltrated into their working areas. There were few incidents the first few days, with a few prisoners being taken along with their weapons. Whenever a contact developed, the team would request extraction. Some of the teams infiltrated with prisoners they had captured earlier. On 7 September, when a small contact was made, the team engaged and killed two enemy before extraction. On 10 September, heavy artillery destruct missions were conducted against targets discovered by the DELTA elements. An enemy cache was found and removed on 12 September. During the DELTA insertions, a company of the 81st Ranger Airborne Battalion moved through the area, making occasional contacts, and suffering only limited casualties. The first significant air action occurred on 23 September, when the team located enemy activity after hearing numerous shots and the chopping of wood. Immediate airstrikes were called in with unknown results. On 1 October, five C-130 lifts took the DELTA elements from the Quan Loi airstrip back to their base camp at Nha Trang and the operation was over.[23]

Only two friendly personnel were killed during the month's operation and another 14 were wounded. Enemy losses were also relatively light, with 15 killed, four captured, and four wounded. The main results were in enemy materiel losses, which included 8,800 pounds of rice, 573 rounds of 82-mm

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mortar ammunition, 61 cases of TNT, and 336 anti-tank grenades. As with all others, several lessons were learned during this operation.[24]

In the area of air support, there were several discrepancies and deficiencies. Helilift support by the seven UH-1 helicopters was considered inadequate. Seven helicopters were not enough to allow exercising all the teams; and the piecemeal insertions, which required from 45 minutes to two hours and ten minutes, meant a unit was unable to react until all elements were on the ground, and that the same LZs had to be used for an extended period. The air radio relay aircraft provided by the VNAF were also considered unsatisfactory. The VNAF pilots would only fly eight hours a day and if the weather were marginal, they would not fly at all. This meant additional hours had to be flown by the FAC pilots who took over radio relay missions. This requirement often left DELTA with only one FAC aircraft for an one- or two-day period. At times, there were no radio relay aircraft performing over the AO.[25]

According to the DELTA After Action Report, the command and control arrangements were also unsatisfactory. Throughout the operation, Project DELTA did not receive an operations order from either the ARVN 5th Infantry Division, to which it was assigned, or the III Corps headquarters. The only documentation it had on the unit's support was a message from MACV saying that support would be provided as agreed upon by counterparts. Being under OpCon of the 5th ARVN Division meant that assets such as preplanned airstrikes initially would have to come from the Division's daily allocation. This meant a reduction in DELTA's tac air employment. Additional helicopter support also had to

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be requested from 5th ARVN Division. In one case, on 12 September, an assault helicopter company (AHC) was requested from the ARVN but was not provided. As a result, DELTA was forced to seek the assistance of an AHC from the 1st Infantry Division (U.S.) to insert the DELTA Reaction Force. No significant visits were made to Project DELTA until its units captured a large enemy ammunition cache. Project DELTA commanders thought the lack of liaison by higher advisory elements resulted in the OpCon headquarters (5th ARVN) having little knowledge of Project DELTA's capabilities. Communications were also inadequate. Immediate traffic could not get through to the 5th ARVN Division, because of what was called "a large volume of operator chatter." On 20 September, no messages were received giving DELTA adequate warning of B-52 strikes prior to the TOT of the first two targets submitted. Prior to the last two requested targets being engaged, four FLASH messages were received with an average handling time of 12 hours for each message.[26/]

In its After Action Report, Project DELTA recommended that its helilift support be increased to a minimum of six UH-1H and four UH-1C aircraft, with the provision that a guaranteed additional lift capability be available to insert company-size reaction forces. It also recommended that air radio relay aircraft be tasked to fly during the hours of 0630 and 1900 daily, particularly since the early and late hours were the most critical of the Recon team's day. If the VNAF could not provide this support, then DELTA believed it should come from an U.S. unit. DELTA also recommended that operational control not be passed below Corps level.

During all recon missions where teams were inserted, an Air Force FAC

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was on standby. The FAC could have tactical air support available in 30 minutes to conduct airstrikes if requested by the team. Since the teams often operated outside of artillery support and since helicopters could easily give away the team's position, this FAC support was essential. The primary mission of the reconnaissance team was to collect intelligence and in this mission, the air support played an integral role. The official 5th SFGA briefing gives recognition to the Air Force role in these operations.[27]

The importance of the FAC to the reconnaissance mission, as well as to the camp defense mission, was phrased in strong terms by the Deputy CO, Company C, 5th Special Forces Group, Lt. Col. Maurice Williams:[28]

> *"...When our patrols are out, they don't operate the way other people do. They're working under cover, probing. They're not out there to overrun anybody. Sometimes these teams find a few people and ambush them, but they're looking for the big place and they're looking for trouble and when they find it, they don't have the organic artillery to back them up. The air has to come in...."*

A consistent theme among commanders of Special Forces units was the importance of FACs who knew the SF operation. There was a heavy payoff in the recon missions in terms of locating the enemy; it was believed a FAC with knowledge of how the SF operates could best exploit the SF capability. According to Colonel Connelly, the SF Commander in I Corps, the FAC was the key link in the SF operation. He made the provision of air support a business-like proposition and short-circuited the problem of small-armed teams not knowing how to go about getting the required air support. "Without the FAC," Colonel Connelly said, "we wouldn't get 50 percent of the enemy we get."[29]

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Later in 1968, in recognition of the role of the FAC in the effective SF operation, action was being taken to provide additional FACs for this purpose, as described in Chapter V.

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CHAPTER IV

AIRLIFT FOR SPECIAL FORCES

The FAC was the long eyes of the Special Forces, and the reflex that triggered and guided the powerful supporting punch of tactical airstrikes--but the Special Forces were sustained largely by airlift. During the last half of 1968, for example, the Special Forces received more than 84 percent of their logistical support by air. This percentage would have doubtless been higher had it not been possible to supply 13 percent of the needed tonnage by waterborne means; only 3 percent of Special Forces' supplies moved by land transport.[1/]

Without airlift, the concept of maintaining widely scattered Special Forces camps deep in hostile territory could have been prohibitively costly in manpower. Land lines of communication (LOCs) would have had to be cleared of enemy activity and then continuously guarded. Airlift freed ground forces from the passive task of securing land LOCs, and permitted the forces thus conserved to be employed in more productive roles.

But the 5th SFGA had no organic aircraft and depended wholly on Air Force fixed-wing and Army rotary-wing resources to provide the needed airlift.[2/] The 834th Air Division (AD) was the element of the Seventh Air Force charged with the Air Force portion of that task.[3/] Formed in October 1966, the 834th AD had evolved by 1968 into the organization shown in Figure 3. The major elements of the 834th were: the 2d Aerial Port Group; the 315th Special Operations Wing; the 483d Tactical Airlift Wing; and two detachments composed of a variable number of C-130 transport aircraft. In addition, a squadron of

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TACTICAL AIRLIFT STRUCTURE

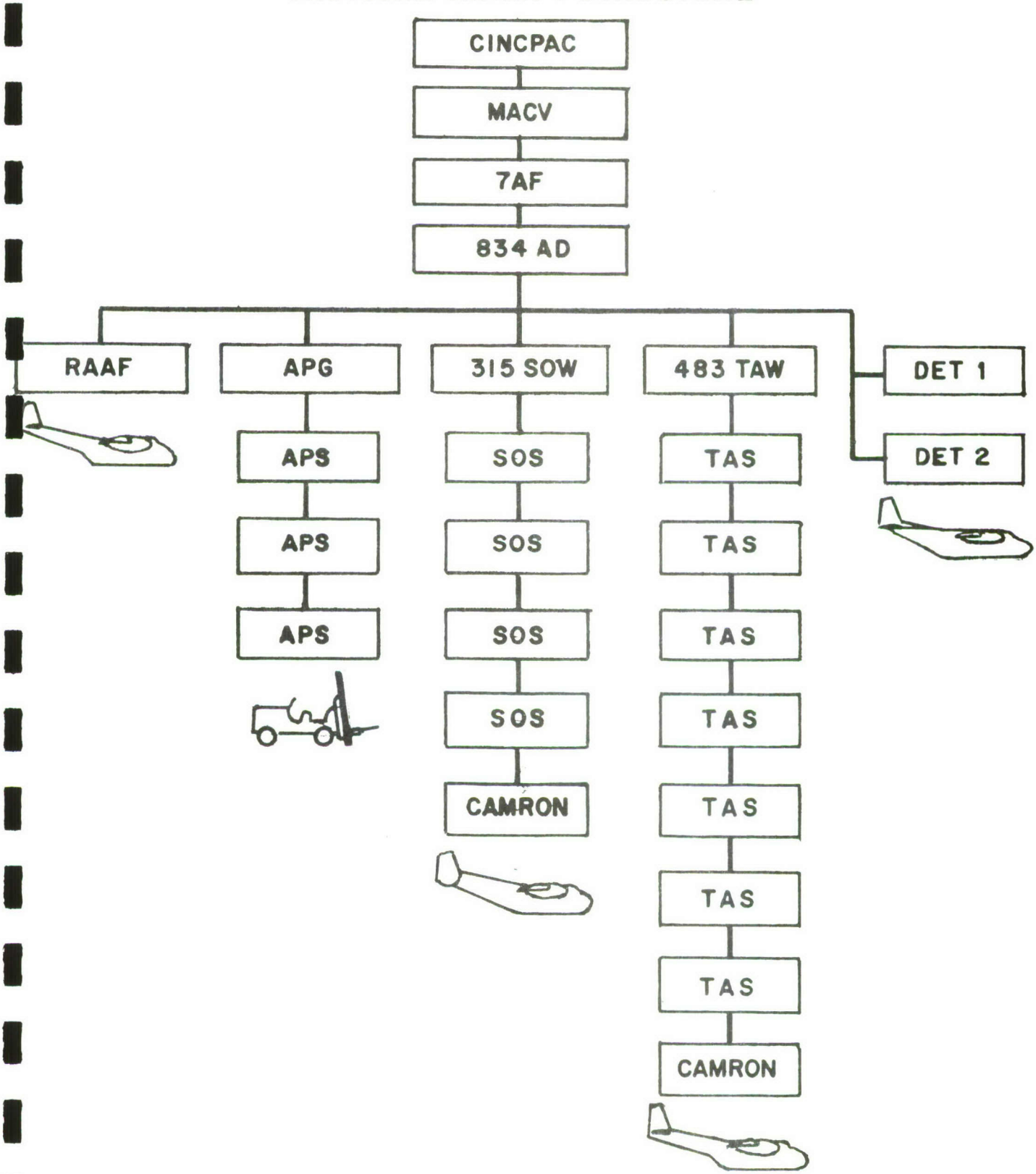

FIGURE 3

Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) C-7A Caribous was under operational control of the 834th.

The Aerial Port Group was organized into three Aerial Port Squadrons which, in turn, maintained detachments at 42 separate terminals to process passengers and handle cargo. The Aerial Port Group also contained a number of Combat Control Teams (CCTs) designed to control operations at remote locations. These teams could be airlanded or para-dropped into forward areas, along with portable communications, navigational aids, and airfield marking and lighting equipment. Once in place, they could manage air traffic at an austere airfield, or control airdrops into a landing zone.

The Special Operations Wing consisted of five C-123 Special Operations Squadrons, one of which was equipped with the UC-123 aircraft for herbicide operations. The C-123 Provider had been used in South Vietnam since 1962. The Provider had proved that it was well-adapted to the role of serving Special Forces; it had operated safely from unimproved assault strips, and its capability was being steadily enhanced. By adding two J-85 jet engines, the Provider became a C-123K with an improved ability to operate from short landing fields. In February 1969, only four C-123s remained to be modified and the program was scheduled to be completed by the end of April 1969. 4/

On 1 January 1967, the U.S. Army's C-7A Caribous had been transferred to the U.S. Air Force. These aircraft were assigned to the six separately located squadrons that formed the 483d Tactical Airlift Wing. Although the C-7A had a limited lift capacity, it was able to operate from rustic 1,000-foot strips.

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The big lift was provided by the C-130s under the operational control of the Air Division's Detachments 1 and 2. The C-130 aircraft were provided on a rotational basis from units of the 315th Air Division.

These resources were used to furnish airlift through two systems: a "dedicated user" system, and a Common Service Airlift System (CSAS). The CSAS provided airlift to "customers" who submitted requests through the MACV Traffic Management Agency (TMA). More than two-thirds of the airlift sorties flown in South Vietnam were consumed by the Common Service Airlift System; the remainder was allocated to the "dedicated user" airlift. This latter service was a daily allocation of aircraft (normally C-7As) to various Free World Forces to satisfy specific, recurrent needs for airlift.[5/]

In February 1969, Special Forces were using a significant part of the "dedicated user" resources. Two C-123s and eight C-7As were dedicated to the support of Special Forces. The Providers were used country-wide, while the Caribous were allocated to Corps Tactical Zones (CTZs): one C-7A in I CTZ; four in II CTZ; two in III CTZ; and one in IV CTZ.[6/]

The Common Service Airlift System provided both regularly scheduled service between major aerial ports and "special mission" or "fragged" service to satisfy random requirements. When Special Forces desired airlift beyond the capability of either its dedicated aircraft or the scheduled service, a Special Mission Airlift Request was submitted. The request was processed as shown in Figure 4. The MACV Traffic Management Agency acted on the request and assigned it a priority. The Airlift Control Center (ALCC) of the 834th

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TACTICAL AIRLIFT SYSTEM

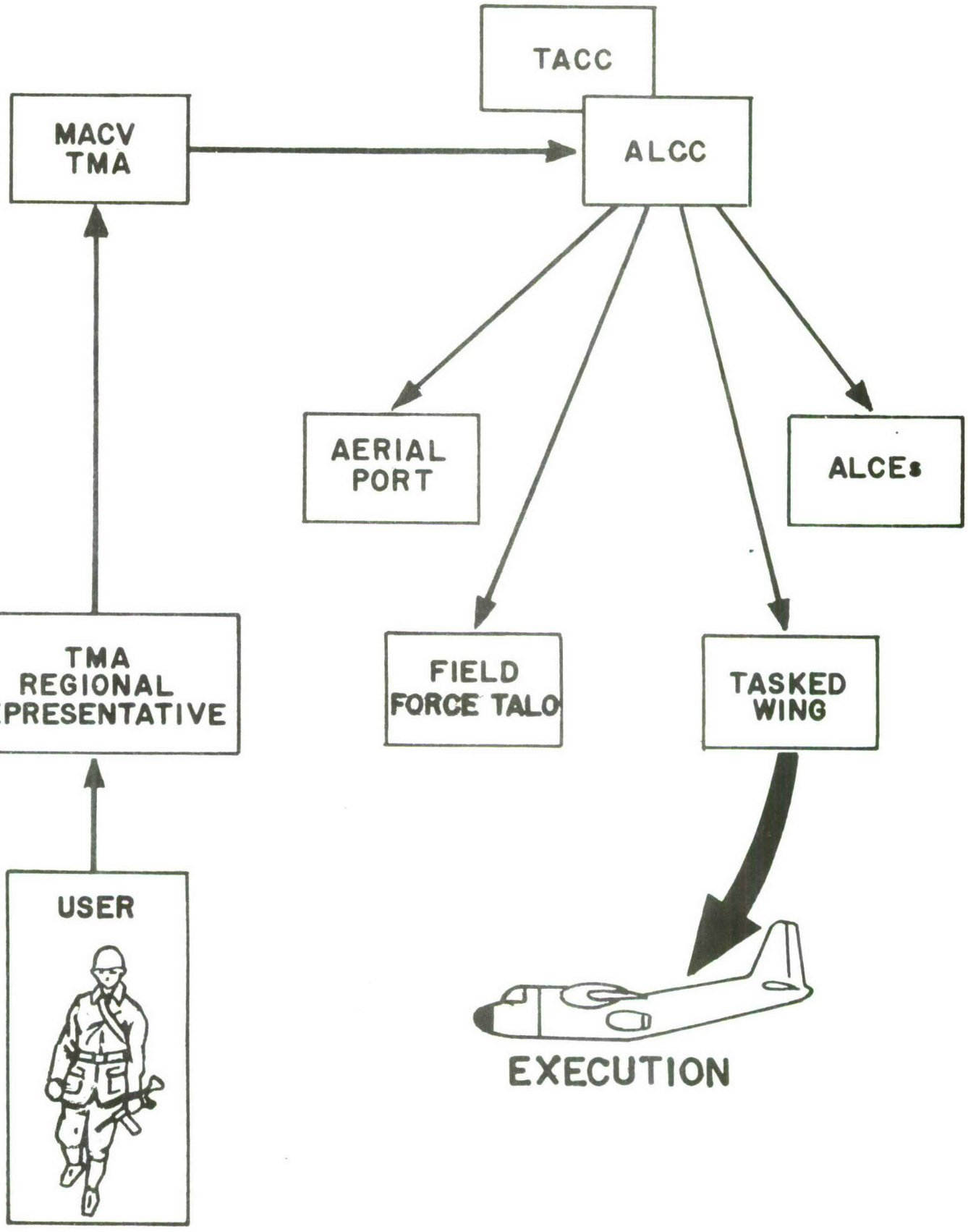

FIGURE 4

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EMERGENCY AIRLIFT REQUEST SYSTEM

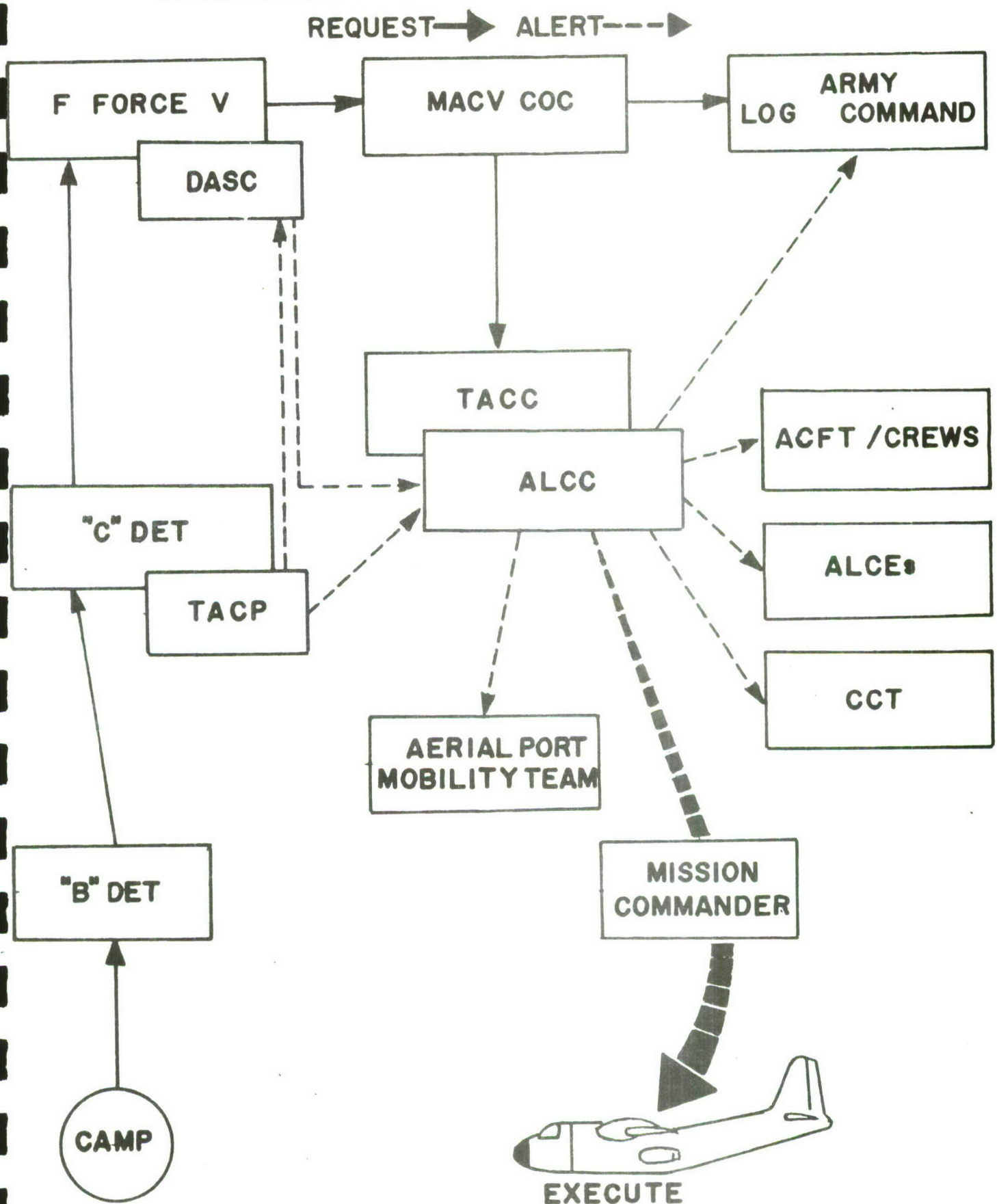

FIGURE 5

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Air Division coordinated the execution of the movement through its Airlift Control Elements (ALCEs), Port Detachments, and Tactical Airlift Liaison Officers (TALOs). In late 1968 and early 1969, Special Forces were routinely allocated one "special mission" aircraft per day, but as often as not, they had no need for the aircraft and permitted it to be diverted to other missions.[7/]

Thus, the routine operations of Special Forces were amply supported by airlift, but a more demanding test came in times of emergency. The system used to respond to emergencies is depicted in Figure 5. The request for emergency airlift was passed up through organizational channels to the MACV Combat Operations Center (COC). In the meantime, the TALO located with the unit that initiated the request had alerted the Airlift Control Center to expect an emergency requirement for airlift. Thus alerted, the ALCC was able to begin the planning and coordination necessary to be instantly responsive. As a result, when MACV COC approved the request and levied the emergency mission on the ALCC, the airlift system was spring-loaded and the mission was quickly set into motion. The early warning provided by this system made it unnecessary to maintain airlift aircraft on costly strip alert.[8/] There were many examples of the quick reaction of airlift to a Special Forces emergency; one such episode occurred in 1968, when the Special Forces Camp at Kham Duc was threatened with an enemy takeover on the morning of 12 May.

When a decision was made to evacuate Kham Duc, COMUSMACV notified the Commander, Seventh Air Force. The 834th Air Division was alerted along with all the in-country and out-country resources of Seventh Air Force.[9/] A C-130 Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center (ABCCC), Hillsboro, was

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directed to provide on-the-spot control of the massive effort.

Although the decision to evacuate was firm, the timing remained uncertain throughout the early morning; the enemy had tightened his grip around the camp, and the runway was blocked by a burning CH-47. Six B-52 sorties struck the surrounding hills, and a continuous stream of fighters punished the attackers. Three FACs were on station under the overall control of Hillsboro.

By 1000H, the helicopter wreckage had been cleared from the runway and the first C-130 landed only to blow a main tire and sustain a fuel leak in the debris littering the runway. At 1105H, one C-123 landed, onloaded 65 passengers, and was back in the air in three minutes. In the meantime, the first C-130 was being repaired; it departed Kham Duc at 1245H. During the morning, the evacuation had been an on-and-off affair, but at 1315H the ALCC was notified to resume the extractions. Between 1315H and 1646H, the C-130s, and C-123s, along with Army and Marine helicopters, braved the withering fire to carry some 1,400 occupants of the camp to safety. Six C-130s and three C-123s accounted for 679 of the evacuees with Army and Marine helicopters rescuing the balance. The cost was heavy in lives and equipment: U.S. losses were 25 KIA, 96 WIA and 23 MIA; ARVN losses were 29 WIA, and 64 MIA; at the end of the evacuation, 678 civilians were unaccounted for, including 492 CIDG personnel. A total of nine aircraft were lost: the Air Force lost an O-2, an A-1H, and two C-130s; the Army lost three helicopters, and the Marines lost two. Still the cost would have been much higher without the firepower delivered against the attackers: 122 USAF and 16 USMC sorties expended ordnance on the enemy and prevented overrun of the camp long enough

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to complete the extraction.

The evacuation of Kham Duc had been a dramatic success, but friendly forces had enjoyed marked advantages that could not be expected during all attacks on Special Forces Camps. First, there had been sufficient tactical warning to enable an initial reinforcement. Next, the runway at Kham Duc could accommodate both C-123s and C-130s. Finally, the weather had been adequate to allow the heavy tactical air support that delayed the enemy's advance and prevented his seizure of the runway; the weather also permitted visual approaches and landings, thus enhancing safety and speed of the evacuation.

The warning of attack came from sound reconnaissance; the weather was a stroke of fortune--but the runway was of the Air Force's own making. Not many camps were as blessed as Kham Duc; most of the Special Forces Camps were served by airfields that were far from favorable for fixed-wing operations. The MACV criteria for evaluating airfields were defined in three broad categories:[10/]

> *"Type I (Minimum Operational): The lowest standard of construction utilizing the absolute minimum criteria. Operations on this type airfield will be hazardous, inefficient and limited to good weather and visibility conditions. Take-off gross weight will be limited depending upon runway surface, weather conditions, and type of aircraft used. Acceleration to take-off and stop is not possible. Type I airfields should be capable of accepting 700 traffic cycles.*
>
> *"Type II (Marginal Operations): Airfields constructed to provide a greater margin of safety than type I, hence greater support and efficiency. Construction of this type airfield will support a maximum of 4,000 traffic*

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cycles with less than maximum payloads. Difficult cross-winds, poor visibility, or inclement weather may reduce the effectiveness of support.

"Type III (Fully Operational): A facility constructed to insure established standards of safety and provide a greater efficiency of operation and support. Operations on this type airfield are practical under most weather conditions and should be capable of withstanding up to 15,000 traffic cycles."

These three categories were more explicitly defined by numerous technical criteria for construction; there was a separate set of criteria for each of the three airlift aircraft. The criteria for runway lengths will serve to illustrate the system:[11]

	Type I (Feet)	Type II (Feet)	Type III (Feet)
C-7	1,000	1,500	2,500
C-123	2,000	2,300	3,500
C-130	2,500	2,900	3,500

In February 1969, the 834th Air Division classified 56 airfields that were used to support Special Forces Camps.[12] The following table indicates the number of those airfields that fell into each "Type" for the various aircraft:[13]

	Type I	Type II	Type III	Total Usable
C-7	23	33	0	56
C-123	8	21	0	29
C-130	6	13	0	19

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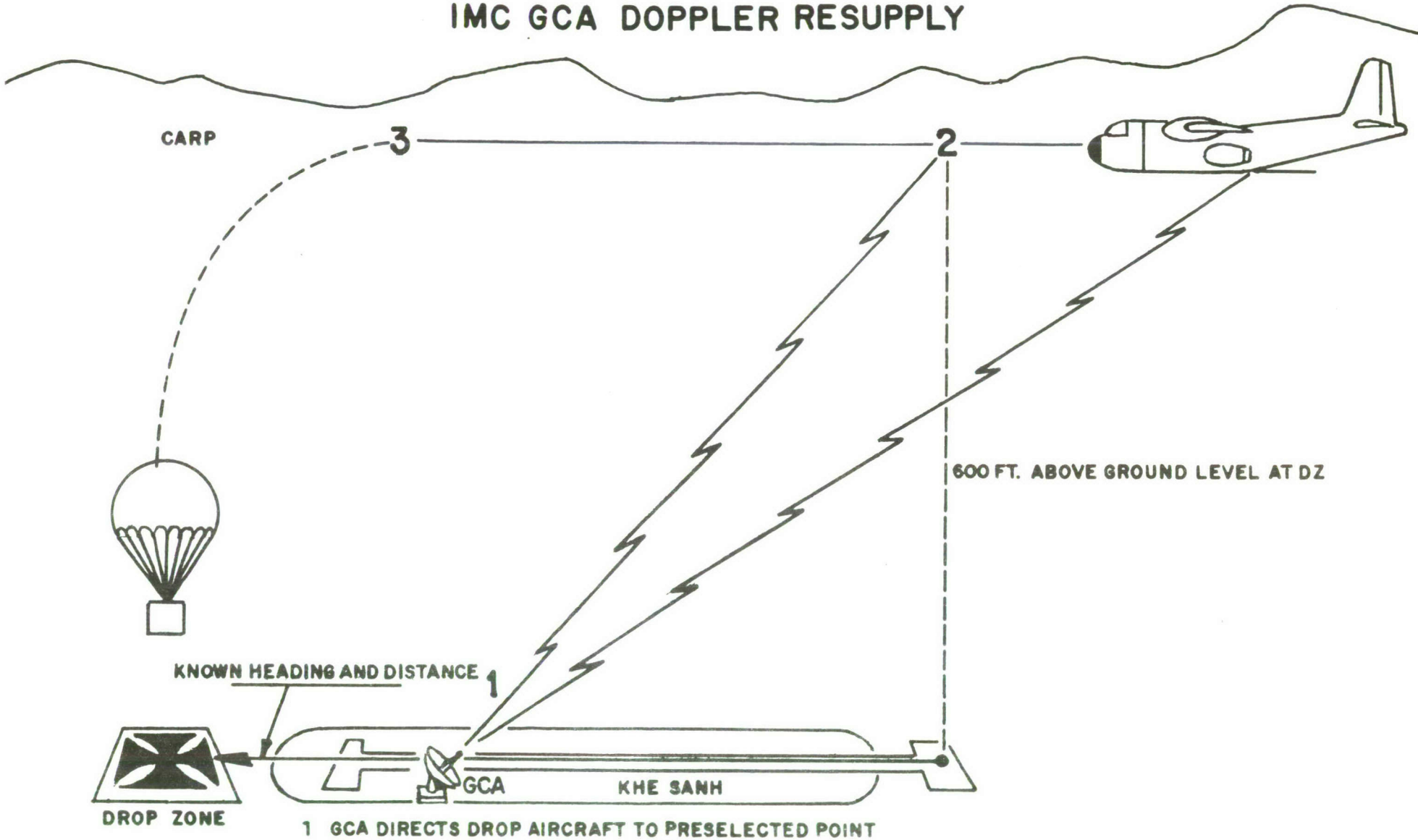
IMC GCA DOPPLER RESUPPLY



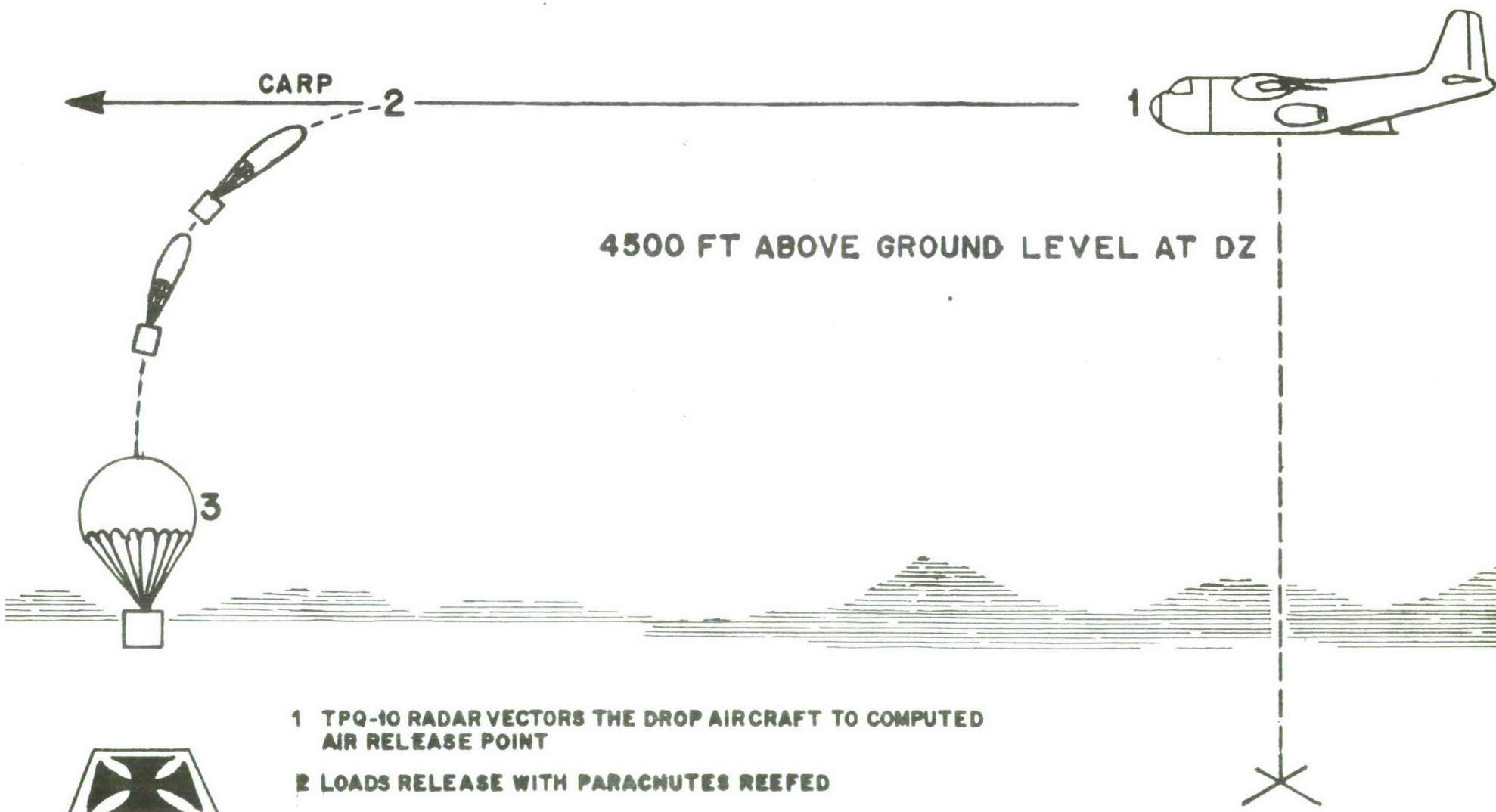
1 GCA DIRECTS DROP AIRCRAFT TO PRESELECTED POINT

2 AIRCREW EFFECTS PRECISE STEERING AND TIMING BASED ON AIRCRAFT DOPPLER SYSTEM

3 LOAD IS RELEASED

FIGURE 6

GROUND RADAR AERIAL RESUPPLY SYSTEM



1 TPQ-10 RADAR VECTORS THE DROP AIRCRAFT TO COMPUTED AIR RELEASE POINT

2 LOADS RELEASE WITH PARACHUTES REEFED

3 PARACHUTES DEPLOY 500 FEET ABOVE GROUND

DROP ZONE (DZ)

FIGURE 7

[redacted]

As one might expect, all of the Special Forces airfields were usable by the Caribou, but only 29 could be used by the C-123, and the C-130 could operate from only 19. Not one of the airfields was rated "fully operational" (Type III) for any of the airlift aircraft. The airfields that served 23 of the camps were rated "minimum operational" for the C-7A; at these airfields even Caribou operations would be "hazardous, inefficient, and limited to good weather and visibility conditions."[14/] The defenders of Kham Duc had been fortunate indeed.

With these facts in mind, it is easy to construct the scenario for a tragic counterpart to Kham Duc. Without tactical warning, with an inadequate runway, and no instrument approach aids, a fog-covered camp could expect scant assistance from the air.

The 834th Air Division had long been aware of the limitations of airlift support during instrument meteorological conditions (IMC). The prolonged siege of Khe Sanh provided an opportunity to test in combat some of the more promising techniques for overcoming this deficiencey.[15/] One such technique is depicted in Figure 6. A C-130 was directed by ground-controlled approach (GCA) radar to a precise point above the approach end of the runway. Given a "mark" at that point, the C-130 crew controlled their further track by Doppler navigation and used a stopwatch to determine their arrival at the computed air release point (CARP). At Khe Sanh, this system enabled delivery of nearly 279 tons of supplies with a circular error average (CEA) of only 83 yards.[16/]

Recognizing that enemy artillery could knock out the GCA, a backup procedure was devised as shown in Figure 7. This system, called ground radar

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aerial resupply system (GRADS), used the Marine TPQ-10 radar, which is similar to the Air Force MSQ-77. The airlift aircraft, flying at 4,500 feet above ground level, was guided by the TPQ-10 to a CARP. At the CARP, the load was released with reefed parachutes to minimize drift. The parachutes automatically deployed 500 feet above ground level. However, this system produced a circular error average of 600 meters and would have been used only as a last resort.[17/]

Although these techniques were successful in sustaining Khe Sanh, they were dependent upon the relatively immobile radars that were in place at Khe Sanh. Most of the airfields supporting Special Forces were not equipped in this manner. Further, the drop zone at Khe Sanh was 300 by 300 yards[18/]--an area that a Camp Strike Force might be strained to secure. In recognition of this, the 834th Air Division submitted a Southeast Asia Operational Requirement (SEAOR) in January 1967 calling for an improved system using the TPQ-10 radar and steerable parachutes; it was estimated that such a system could produce CEAs of 200 feet or less from drop altitudes as high as 10,000 feet. By 3 March 1969, the proposal had not materialized.[19/]

Another SEAOR was submitted in March 1967 for a very lightweight precision approach system compatible with the standard aircraft instrument landing system (ILS). A system known as Tactical Approach and Landing Radar (TALAR) was being developed to fill this need. TALAR would weigh about 50 pounds and could be set up in only 15 minutes. TALAR was programmed to be operational by July 1969.[20/]

Still, any ground system was vulnerable to enemy fire. Maj. Gen. Burl W. McLaughlin, Commander of the 834th Air Division, said,[21]

> *"The ultimate need for IMC airdrops is a self-contained aircraft capability requiring no ground aids. Similarly, the ultimate in airland capability under IMC is an aircraft with self-contained precision approach capability. The adverse-weather aerial delivery system (AWADS) development program will equip tactical aircraft with a self-contained avionics package and provide adequate capability with perhaps one exception, terrain-avoidance radar. If, in the absence of ground radar, airland had been the only method of resupplying Khe Sanh, the terrain-avoidance capability would have been necessary to provide the pilot glide slope information to complete a safe precision approach. In addition, the need to deliver loads as low as possible is dictated by the inherent inaccuracies of a parachute drop, resulting primarily from unknown wind conditions between the aircraft and the ground. Therefore, the lower the aircraft, the more accurate the drop; and to provide the aircraft the capability to descend to these low altitudes for IMC drops, terrain-avoidance radar is essential."*

In vivid contrast to the sophisticated systems suggested by General McLaughlin, the Vietnamese war has fostered some bizarre improvizations. Small CIDG patrols, operating under a dense triple canopy of jungle rain forest, frequently found conventional aerial resupply to be impractical. Supplies dropped by parachute were almost certain to become entangled in the inaccessible heights of the rain forest. Helicopter resupply had two disadvantages: first, even without the encumbrance of a parachute, the supplies usually could not penetrate the jungle; and, second, a hovering helicopter was quite likely to disclose the position of the patrol. During 1967 and 1968 in I Corps Tactical Zone, the USAF and USASF devised a technique of resupply using food-filled napalm cans dropped from A-1 aircraft. The napalm cans were packed with small aluminum foil, pillow-shaped bags filled with indigenous rations

(rice, tea, dried meat, and vegetables); the A-1s would drop the cans near the CIDG patrols with as little fanfare as possible. Although the cans frequently ruptured and scattered the small ration bags, a large percentage of the food was recoverable and edible.[22/]

Airlift has also had an impact on the non-military aspects of Special Forces operations. C-7A and C-123 aircraft serving Special Forces Camps normally brought in a load of supplies and then returned empty to their bases. In an effort to win support of the local population, Special Forces officers sometimes informally requested airlift aircrews to accept civilian passengers for the empty return flights. The Special Forces personnel would manifest those civilians approved by the local District Chief. Although the Special Forces officers often suspected the District Chief was collecting a sum of money for his "approval," there was no way to prove the suspicion, and the practice was accepted by all. Apparently, the amount of the payoffs was held to a level that the traffic would bear because the flights were always eagerly sought. This informal airline was a one-way carrier; once the civilians reached the airlift terminal, they were allowed to leave the base, but not to return. After buying their precious supplies (kerosene, candles, matches, piglets, etc.), the civilians would make their way home by foot or by bus--no doubt often paying "taxes" or "tolls" to the Viet Cong along the way.[23/]

On one occasion, the popularity of the flights to the "big cities" brought on an incipient CIDG revolt. A mob of civilians and CIDG soldiers had fought to board a C-7A, ignoring the manifest prepared by the USASF. In an effort to restore order and discipline, the senior Special Forces officer had discontinued all passenger service for an indefinite period. This "punishment"

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had incensed an element of the CIDG complement; two full CIDG companies assembled at the helicopter pad of the camp to protest the ban on air transport. The protestors ignored orders to disband and return to their quarters--a mutiny seemed in the making. The senior Special Forces officer contacted a nearby FAC and requested a show of force from some fighters whose ordnance had been expended. The "flag" was soon shown; two F-4s were directed in for low passes over the mutinous troops. The last pass was quite low and fast; after buzzing the protestors, the pilot engaged both afterburners and pulled into a vertical climb until he disappeared from sight. Convinced that the empty sky could soon be filled with power, the protestors decided they preferred that power to be friendly--they rapidly dispersed. After a week, the passenger service was restored to an orderly camp.[24]

Special Forces personnel, who served in the scattered camps, became acutely aware of the isolation of significant parts of the Vietnamese population. For friendly elements within this isolated populace, air transport provided the only safe means for conducting economic and political communication. Of the 250 Districts in South Vietnam, 200 were outside urban areas, and some 50 to 60 were isolated from any commercial center. The problem presented an opportunity for a unique Civic Action program. A number of small, simple, airlift aircraft might be made available to the Government of Vietnam (GVN), along with training for flight and maintenance crews. With such a resource, the GVN would gain a powerful tool in nourishing the nation's economy, as well as enhancing the influence and integrity of the legitimate government.[25]

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CHAPTER V

ALO/FAC SUPPORT FOR SPECIAL FORCES

Throughout the war, Special Forces had received the full spectrum of support from Seventh Air Force. Tactical Airlift had been routinely used to resupply Camp Strike Forces and redeploy Mobile Strike Forces. Tactical airstrikes had often proved decisive in the defense of Special Forces camps. The USAF Forward Air Controllers assigned to Project DELTA had been particularly effective in supporting that unit's hazardous patrols. However, the success of the Project DELTA FACs had made Special Forces officers eager for "more of the same."

On 11 July 1968, Brig. Gen. George W. McLaughlin, Deputy Director of the Seventh Air Force Tactical Air Control Center (TACC), visited Headquarters, 5th SFGA to investigate the adequacy of USAF support for Special Forces. General McLaughlin was briefed by the Commander, 5th SFGA, Col. H. R. Aaron, and the Group ALO, Lt. Col. Bruce Jones, USAF. The Special Forces officers were generally quite satisfied with their Air Force support, but during the course of the briefing, Colonel Jones asserted there were insufficient ALOs and FACs available to provide adequate support to Special Forces. Although FACs had been provided for most Mobile Strike Force Commands, no FACs were dedicated to the support of Camp Strike Forces. The CSFs had to depend on Sector FACs in the ARVN system to provide support as a secondary mission. (Figure 8 depicts the then-typical provisions for ALO/FAC support of Special Forces and the ARVN within a Corps.)

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SUPPORT FOR SF & ARVN WITHIN A CORPS JULY 1968

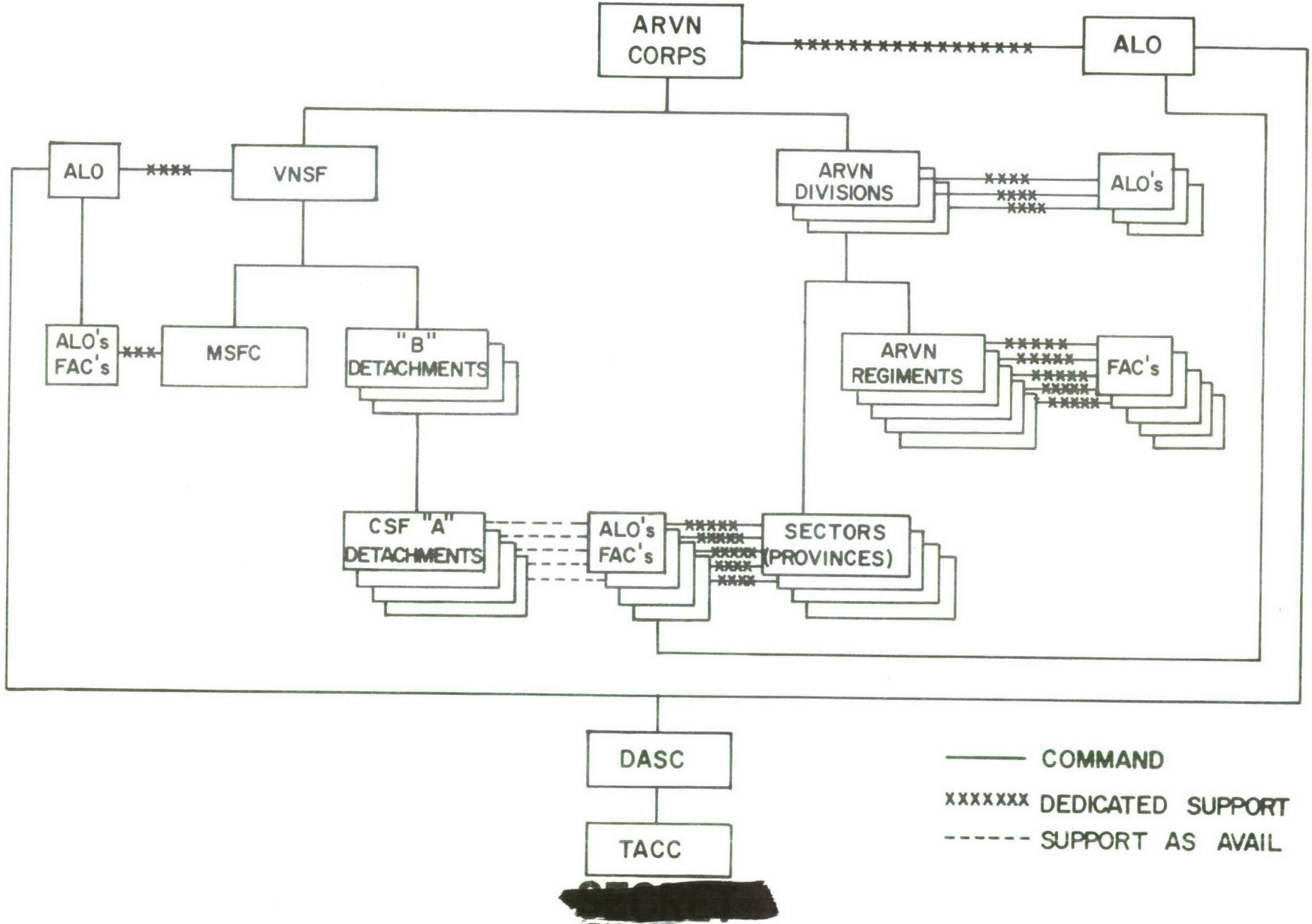

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FIGURE 8

SUPPORT FOR SF & ARVN

PRESENT SYSTEM

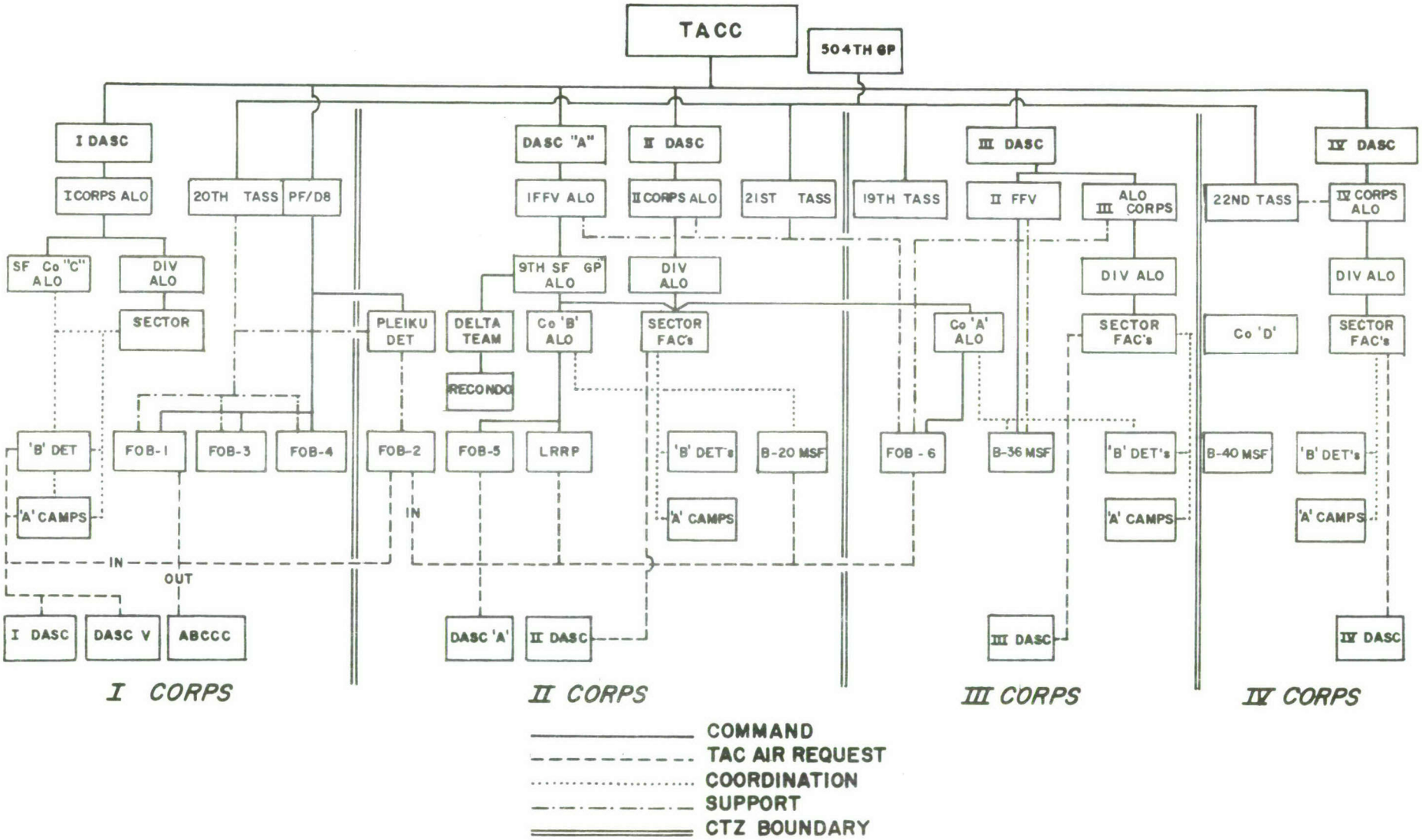

FIGURE 9

[redacted]

Colonel Jones further averred the ALOs/FACs supporting Special Forces throughout RVN were impeded in their performance by "varied and confusing command lines, areas of responsibility, and support channels"[1/] At the end of this briefing, General McLaughlin promptly appointed Col. Robert M. Lowry, Director DASC Alpha, to chair a study group to investigate the problems that had been identified and to devise specific remedies.

Colonel Lowry assembled representatives from all the pertinent agencies and convened the study group at Nha Trang on 26 July 1968. This study group began with a critical analysis of the then-current system of ALO/FAC support for Special Forces. Special Forces operations had always been fluid, flexible, and subject to constant change. At the same time, Seventh Air Force had always suffered from a distinct shortage of ALOs, FACs and their associated aircraft. The introduction of the Mobile Strike Force concept and the additional requirement to support PRAIRIE FIRE and DANIEL BOONE operations, had severely stretched ALO/FAC resources. The continuous ad hoc efforts to satisfy constantly changing and expanding demands, coupled with a chronic shortage of resources, had indeed produced a patchwork structure for ALO/FAC command, coordination, and support--a brief glance at Figure 9 should suffice to prove the point. Further, while Seventh Air Force had amply provided for the defense of Special Forces "A" Camps and their controlling "B" Detachments, the study group could find no evidence of formal provisions for supporting the daily offensive operations of the Camp Strike Forces. In the words of the study produced by Colonel Lowry's group, "...Special Forces are not presently receiving adequate support in all Corps Tactical Zones. The support has been haphazard because

[redacted]

[redacted]

of the lack of definitive lines of command specifically designed to support Special Forces activities within each CTZ. Even within CTZs where support has been satisfactory, it has been dependent on [the] personalities involved and verbal agreements between the Corps ALO and subordinate ALOs/FACs."[2/]

To remedy these deficiencies, the Study Group designed a new structure for ALO/FAC support of Special Forces (See Fig. 10.) The new system would not only straighten and clarify lines of command, coordination, and support, it would also specifically designate people and resources, and explicitly define their roles in the support of Special Forces. The most marked innovation of the proposal was the assignment of a FAC to each of the "B" Detachments controlling Special Forces Camps; thus, for the first time, Camp Strike Forces would have continuous FAC coverage dedicated to support their operations, rather than having to rely on the "availability" of Sector FACs. It was all very attractive, but the rub arose in the realm of resources; the new system would require certain ALOs/FACs, as well as O-1/O-2 aircraft to be "reassigned" within the meager pot available to Seventh Air Force.

Nevertheless, on 1 August 1968, the Study Group briefed General McLaughlin on their recommendations and received a tentative go-ahead with instructions to draft and coordinate a directive to effectuate their proposals. By 17 August 1968, an Operations Plan had been drafted and distributed for coordination. After incorporating revisions arising out of coordination, Colonel Lowry forwarded his final proposal to General McLaughlin's office on 25 September 1968.

[redacted]

[redacted]

SUPPORT FOR SF & ARVN

PROPOSED SYSTEM

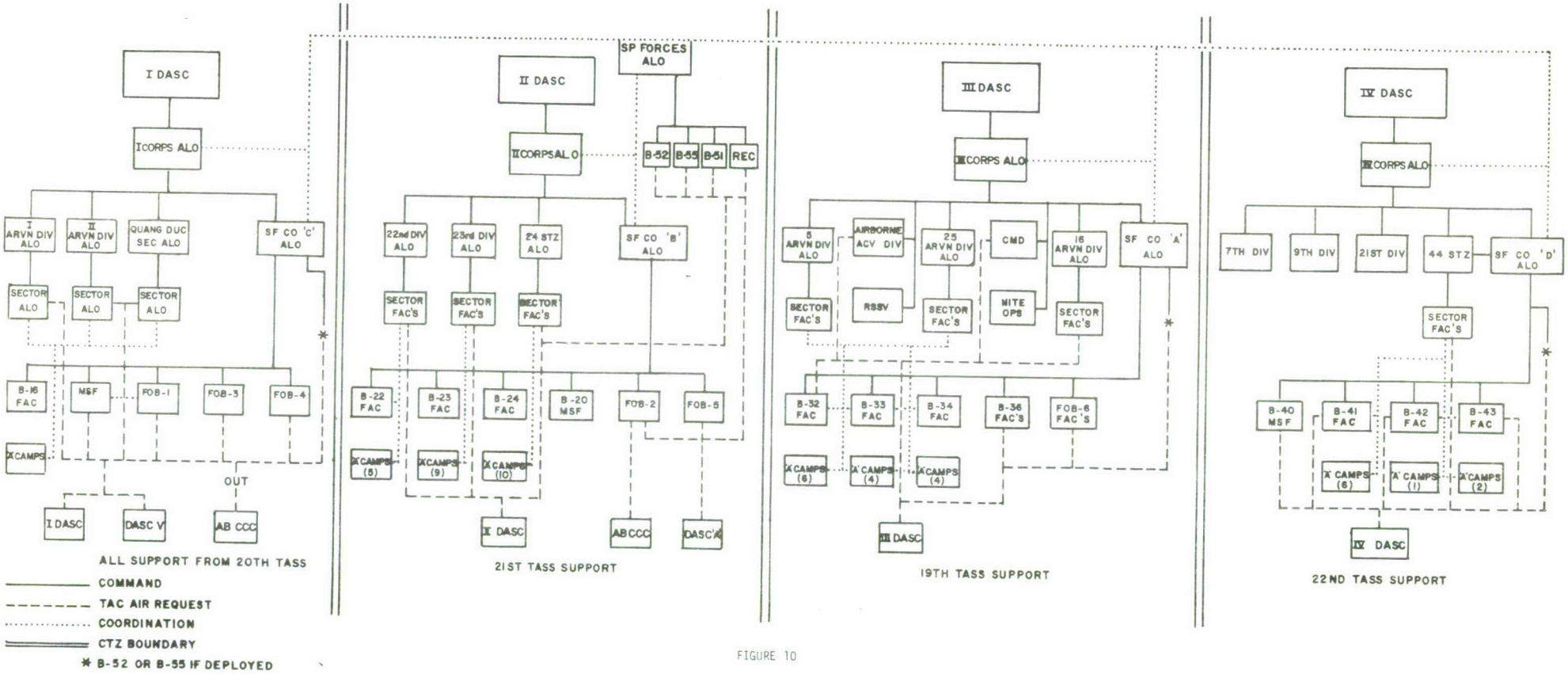

FIGURE 10

[redacted]

Coincidentally with the receipt of the "Lowry Study," Seventh Air Force learned that PACAF was dispatching a team to SEA "to perform a detailed study of the pilot and aircraft [quantitative] requirements to support the ALO/FAC and SCAR [Strike Control and Reconnaissance] missions of 7th Air Force."[3/] Action on the Lowry study was delayed pending the outcome of the PACAF survey. The PACAF team conducted an exhaustive investigation from 8 October through 8 November 1968. The chief of the PACAF survey team was Col. E. A. Schneider, Assistant DCS/Operations, Command Control hence, the report that resulted from the team's visit became known as the "Schneider Study."

Although the more comprehensive Schneider Study did not agree in every area with the Lowry Study, each indicated that PRAIRIE FIRE and DANIEL BOONE operations required 18 ALOs/FACs and 12 aircraft. The Lowry Study had recommended certain totals of ALOs/FACs and aircraft to support other Special Forces;[4/] the Schneider Study recognized a need for lesser numbers.[5/]

Although the Schneider Study did not fully support the Lowry proposals, it did recognize the need for more support to Special Forces than was authorized at that time; it recommended raising Special Forces authorizations in personnel from 13 to 24, and in aircraft from 9 to 13. Overall authorizations did not fare as well; the Schneider Study recommended cutting total Seventh Air Force authorizations in personnel from 835 to 736, and in aircraft from 442 to 435. Still, the differences in the authorizations were largely academic when compared to the dearth of resources which were actually assigned. Even using the lower authorizations recommended by the Schneider Study, 7AF was short 124 ALOs/FACs (83% manned) and 139 aircraft (68% equipped).[6/] In the

light of this reality, it was apparent that Special Forces were not being slighted with respect to the then-current authorizations--they were 85 percent manned and 67 percent equipped.[7] On the other hand, if the authorizations recommended by the Schneider Study were used as the criterion, the picture looked quite different. In November 1968, the manpower and aircraft assigned to support Special Forces were coincidentally only 46 percent of the resources that Colonel Schneider judged were justified.[8] Thus, in the main, the Lowry and Schneider studies agreed that Special Forces needed a larger slice of the partial pie.

The Schneider Study was dispatched from PACAF to Seventh Air Force on 2 December 1968. The 7AF staff requested reconsideration of some of its recommendations. As a result, aircraft authorizations were not lowered, and manning authorizations were compromised at 801 spaces. By 3 March 1969, final action on overall authorizations was imminent.

Next, the Seventh Air Force Staff had to address the question of how to distribute its shortages. Since both the Lowry and Schneider studies had recommended increased support for Special Forces, it seemed likely that at least the lesser Schneider goals would be met. Perhaps the Lowry objectives could be approached by the expedient of explicitly tasking the Sector FACs to support the Camp Strike Forces within their areas.

In any event, it was easy to make a strong case for optimizing USAF support to Special Forces. In terms of U.S. lives and U.S. dollars, Special Forces operations had been uniquely efficient. During 1967, CIDG forces killed

76 VC/VNA for each U.S. Special Forces soldier killed in action; in 1968, that ratio rose to 98 to 1. The direct, daily operating cost of maintaining a CIDG soldier in the field was less than one-fifth the cost of sustaining a U.S. soldier in combat.[9/] Obviously such efficiency should be exploited; in no case should it be denied its fair share of the benefits of airpower.

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CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In the counterinsurgency phase of U.S. operations between 1961 and 1965, the United States Air Force was largely committed to the support of U.S.-advised ARVN elements with much of the support going to Special Forces Camps and unconventional operations. Despite a very limited number of aircraft in the theater, this commitment was met admirably. In late 1964 and the first half of 1965, it was USAF and VNAF airpower, which provided the primary firepower against desperate VC efforts to take over the country by slicing across its midriff in II Corps along Route 19 and shattering ARVN battalions and Special Forces Camps throughout the country. In the 1965 battles of Song Be, Dong Xoia, Ba Gia, Duc Co, and Plei Me in this critical period before U.S. ground forces arrived in strength, airpower took a heavy toll of enemy attackers and was credited with playing a decisive role in preventing the enemy take-over.[1/]

With the arrival of U.S. ground forces beginning in mid-1965 and the institution of ROLLING THUNDER strikes in NVN in February 1965, emphasis on support of Special Forces declined. Most of the U.S. airpower deployed to RVN in 1965 was used to support large ground search and destroy operations. In December 1965, however, the USAF took an early interest in the Project DELTA program of the 5th SFGA. As these SF mobile strike operations expanded in 1966 and 1967, they received more air support, largely because the recon teams were outside the range of organic artillery and were almost entirely dependent on tactical fighters for heavy fire support.

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Airpower was always available through the Tactical Air Control System to support Special Forces Camps under attack, and on several occasions, large numbers of strike sorties were delivered in short periods. The enemy attacks upon A Shau and Kham Duc have been documented in previous reports. These two camps were lost, but there were several others which owed their continued existence to the timely and heavy employment of airstrikes in a camp defense role. Dak To, Duc Lap, Kontum, Thuong Duc, and many others in 1967 and 1968 faced the threat of enemy take-over but were saved by airstrikes and the Spooky AC-47 aircraft, for which the Special Forces had a very high regard.

The camps also relied heavily upon USAF airlift for survival. Cut off from normal land resupply, the majority of their supplies came from the C-7s, C-123s and C-130s of the 834th Air Division. This airlift mission during periods when camps were under attack was extremely hazardous, as at Khe Sanh in the early months of 1968, but only rarely was a camp unable to obtain the airlift it requested.

One deficiency in air support, which was brought to the fore in mid-1968, was insufficient FACs dedicated to Special Forces support. Although the Special Forces Camp Strike Forces and Mobile Strike Forces had an equitable share of the scarce ALO/FAC resources, their greater dependence upon air support and their greater effectiveness seemed to call for more FAC support. Some of the Special Forces commanders of Corps-wide activities considered their ALO/FAC resources could be increased fivefold--from two to ten and still be fully occupied. This problem was receiving 7AF attention in late 1968 and early 1969, but the decision on just what could be provided had not

been made at the time of this report.

FACs had pointed out on numerous occasions, the need for more FAC aircraft to be assigned Special Forces' operations. During Operation ALAMO in August-September 1968, there was an eight-day period in which DELTA TACP had only one aircraft. Since maintenance was being performed on the other, and as these were borrowed aircraft, no replacement was available. The FAC during Operation ALAMO recommended that DELTA be assigned permanent aircraft through the 21st TASS, so the Special Forces ALO could control the aircraft and its maintenance, thus insuring that the TACP would not be short of aircraft for extended periods.[2/]

There was a feeling among several USAF personnel associated with support of recon teams that armed O-2s or OV-10s would be very useful for the Special Forces situation. The ALO for the 5th SFGA cited the FAC mission of protecting small recon teams and helping in breaking enemy contact without compromising the ground mission. He believed that armed FAC planes would be very effective for this type of mission. They would conserve tactical airpower by using their own ordnance to break enemy contact. He believed the Project DELTA operation could provide the ideal operational test environment for the OV-10. All its capabilities could be tested and evaluated in actual field operations and combat conditions.[3/]

On the other hand, many Seventh Air Force personnel were opposed to the concept of arming FAC aircraft. Employing an armed FAC would increase the potential of combat losses of this valuable asset. Additionally, if FAC aircraft were armed, this might detract from the FAC's normal mission; an

aggressive armed FAC might momentarily neglect his mission to call in tactical airstrikes.

During Operation ALAMO, a Project DELTA operation running from 26 August to 1 October, the USAF FAC reported that on two occasions ground contact was broken by the FAC firing White Phosphorus (WP) rockets into the enemy position. Breaking contact was essential to the small recon team mission, and the FAC felt that the 20 to 30 minutes required for an immediate airstrike was too long. There was always a FAC within less than 15 minutes of the teams, who, if armed, could break contact in many cases to allow the team to be safely extracted.[4/]

The air support of Special Forces reconnaissance operations, which evolved from experience dating back to December 1965, was one of the more significant and more productive applications of airpower in Vietnam. Because of security limitations, certain phases of this mission, which have proved to be highly productive, are not enumerated. A mutual feeling emerged in Southeast Asia, however, between the USAF and Special Forces that the two could team up to great advantage in what is fundamentally an unconventional warfare mission. The employment of small teams dropped into the heart of enemy territory, and relying upon an overhead FAC for position information, air support in emergencies, and protection of mission integrity, had a high payoff for a small investment of resources.

The unique tactics of the Special Forces ground recon mission made air support essential, particularly for the movement of teams outside artillery support fans in their necessarily covert pattern of action. The full exploitation of this ground recon capability would simply not be possible without

the cover provided by air. The recognition of this fact led to increased emphasis by the USAF and Special Forces shaping tactics and procedures to get the maximum teamwork out of the partnership. This report has covered several of the lessons which were learned in the heat of battle. There are many others which are included in the After Action Reports of SF operations. The most important of these lessons was the need for more FACs in this type of operation, and action was being taken toward this end in early 1969.

The performance of air in the defense of Special Forces Camps under attack has been well documented, and has received extensive publicity due to the drama inherent in an enemy attack on an outpost. The combination of constant FAC cover, Spooky, and COMBAT SKYSPOT support at night, and fighter aircraft during daylight hours, plus a centralized system, which can pinpoint this support in a minimum of time, has permitted the continued existence of many camps which might otherwise have been lost. The Seventh Air Force plan for defense of Special Forces Camps has been implemented on numerous occasions with good effect. Several Special Forces commanders interviewed on this subject have indicated their opinion that no camp needs to be evacuated, so long as sufficient air support can be guaranteed.

Marked progress has been made in the task of bringing critical supplies and reinforcements into a beleagured camp. The airdrop techniques, combat-tested during the 1968 siege of Khe Sanh, promise significant utility in maintaining an air line of communications despite unfavorable weather. It is almost axiomatic that airlift support is vital to the existence and survival of the scattered network of Special Forces Camps. It should be possible to

equip each camp with an inexpensive and relatively invulnerable precision approach aid that would permit airland or airdrop resupply to continue during periods of darkness or poor weather conditions. The needed capability is on the way, and with its acquisition, the USAF will be able to offer all-weather airlift to a cloud-covered camp that is under attack.

The early entry of the USAF into the Special Forces reconnaissance mission in 1965 has enabled the accumulation of a wealth of experience in this important mission. This is a true counterinsurgency mission, one existing before the war became more conventionalized in 1965, and one which will exist should the enemy revert to guerrilla tactics to achieve his objectives. There is also the real possibility that such missions may still be required in a post-truce period when a border surveillance program may be of continued importance. The 5th SFGA-7AF "special partnership" has resulted from a sincere effort to cope with the peculiarities of the combat environment in Vietnam. It will certainly be applicable to future counterinsurgency actions, should they arise elsewhere in the world.

FOOTNOTES

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5. Ibid, pg 41;
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13. (C) Interview with Lt Col Donald J. Parsons, Horn DASC, Da Nang, by Kenneth Sams, 14 Oct 68.
14. (C) Interview with Lt Col Daniel Connelly, CO, C Company, 5th SFGA, by Kenneth Sams, Da Nang, 16 Oct 68. (Hereafter cited: Lt Col Connelly Interview.)
15. (C) Interview with Lt Col Maurice Williams, Deputy CO, C Company, 5th SFGA, by Kenneth Sams, Da Nang, 16 Oct 68.
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17. (C) Interview with 1st Lt Richard McDonald, 5th SFGA, by Kenneth Sams, 8 Oct 68.
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GLOSSARY

ABCCC	Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center
AD	Air Defense
AHC	Assault Helicopter Company
ALCC	Airlift Control Center
ALCE	Airlift Control Element
ALO	Air Liaison Officer
AM	Amplitude Modification
AO	Area of Operation
ARVN	Army of Republic of Vietnam
AWADS	Adverse Weather Aerial Delivery System
BS	Border Surveillance
CARP	Computed Air Release Point
CCT	Combat Control Team
CIDG	Civilian Irregular Defense Group
COC	Combat Operations Center
COMUSMACV	Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
CRP	Combat Reconnaissance Platoon
CSAF	Common Service Airlift System
CSF	Combat Strike Forces
CTZ	Corps Tactical Zone
DASC	Direct Air Support Center
FAC	Forward Air Controller
FOB	Forward Operating Base
FWMAF	Free World Military Assistance Forces
GRADS	Ground Radar Aerial Resupply System
GVN	Government of Vietnam
IDC	Installation Defense Command
ILS	Instrument Landing System
JGS	Joint General Staff
KBA	Killed by Air
KIA	Killed in Action
LOC	Line of Communication
LRRP	Long-Range Reconnaissance Patrol
LZ	Landing Zone

MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group
MACSOG	Military Assistance Command Studies and Observation Group
MACV	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
MAF	Marine Amphibious Force
MF	Mike Force
MGF	Mobile Guerrilla Force
MSF	Mobile Strike Force
MSFC	Mobile Strike Force Command
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
OpCon	Operational Control
PF	Popular Forces
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
Recon	Reconnaissance
RF	Regional Forces
RVN	Republic of Vietnam
RVNAF	Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces
SEAOR	Southeast Asia Operational Requirement
SF	Special Forces
SFGA	Special Forces Group Airborne
SFOB	Special Forces Operating Base
TACP	Tactical Air Control Party
TALO	Tactical Airlift Liaison Officer
TALOR	Tactical Approach and Landing Radar
TAOR	Tactical Area of Responsibility
TDY	Temporary Duty
TIC	Troops in Contact
TMA	Traffic Management Agency
TOT	Time Over Target
USASF	U.S. Army Special Forces
USMC	United States Marine Corps
US/VN	United States/Vietnam
VC	Viet Cong
VNAF	Vietnamese Air Force
VNSF	Vietnamese Special Forces
VR	Visual Reconnaissance
WIA	Wounded in Action