

Vinh Long Night Operations July 1967- July 1968

199th Aviation Company night operations were performed in support of the Vinh Long Army Airfield and Vinh Long city defense. The mission was to provide early warning, detection and location of Viet Cong Force movement or attack during the hours of darkness around or near the city or airfield. A single aircraft and pilot would be in the air to provide the eyes and ears to identify, locate and if possible suppress enemy activity within the outlying areas. The aircraft was ideally suited for the mission due to its quiet operation and lengthy loiter time. The 199th aircraft could be armed with 2.75 inch rockets with 18 lb H.E. Warheads, two M-60 machine guns with 550 rounds per gun or configured to drop four illumination flares. Mission assignments consisted of a single ship/single pilot flight of a duration of about four hours. Flights were scheduled from about 2000 hours to 2400 hours and 2400 hours to 0400 hours. Pilots were in contact with the airfield tower and 199th operations at all times and other frequencies as required or desired.

Missions were flown by pilots from 199th headquarters, Vinh Long platoon sector pilots and visiting platoon pilots from other sectors. Pilots flew 2-4 night missions per week in addition to their other specified duties and other day time mission flights. The aircraft utilized for these missions were those assigned to the headquarters or those that were at the Vinh Long location for maintenance.

The basic night mission profile consisted of maintenance crew flight prep and arming and aircraft launch and loiter over the Vinh Long sector. **Radio contact was maintained on the appropriate frequencies including Vinh Long tower and 199th operations and secondary contact with ARVN operations and artillery. Contact was also available with U.S. Navy river operations and U.S. Air Force air operations.** Observation or contact with the enemy at night resulted in the pilot contacting the 199th operations and the tower to report the type of activity observed and the coordinates of that activity and the support required. In the instance of mortar attack or ground attack against a friendly target the bird dog pilot was able to provide immediate suppressive fire with the aircraft weapons systems and/or direct artillery fire or gunship counter attack upon the enemy attacking force. The bird dog was an effective early warning and suppressive fire instrument against night attack of the city and airfield.

Specific personal experiences:

Vinh Long mortar attacks: One of several remain etched in my mind due to the personal effect that it had on me and my friend Hienze Zoegner. Heinze was scheduled for a 2000-2400 hr mission but came down with the flu. Hienz and I shared a hootch with some other pilots and our beds were about 8ft apart and across from each other on opposite sides of the room. Since he was feeling so bad I flew his mission and he went to bed. It was a quiet night until about 2200 hours when I observed three mortar launch flashes from a rice paddy tree line and then three impact flashes within the airfield perimeter. I called in the coordinates, requested helicopter gunship support while

continuing to lay down rocket and M-60 fire on the launch area and direct the gunships to the target. The gunships worked over the area with their rockets and grenade launchers. We both returned to the airfield and rearmed and I went back to continue the watch. There was no further activity and I was relieved on station by the relief pilot. Upon arrival at the hootch I was told that the first round had landed by the outside wall about a foot from my bed and had filled my mattress and pillow with shrapnel. When that first round hit, Hienze rolled out of the bed onto the floor, waited a moment and then headed for the bunker which was just a few feet from our door. The second round impacted nearby and Hienze was blown into the bunker with a shard of shrapnel in his buttocks. The third round impacted a little further away without doing any damage. I believe Hienze was the only one wounded that night. Had he not had the flu and had been able to fly that mission it is likely that I would have been in my bed and the outcome would have prevented me from writing this account. What happened to the V.C. mortar men? They must have fired their three rounds and quickly departed; a flyover the next day found only the impact our weapons had inflicted on the turf. No sign of the bad guys.

Swift Boat Support: (First let me state that I was there and landed my Bird Dog on John Kerry's Swift Boat! Just kidding!) Vinh Long's location near the Mekong River allowed us the opportunity to work in conjunction with the Navy brown water guys and the Navy Sea Wolves flight detachment that shared the airfield with us. The Swift Boats patrolled the river and its tributaries at night and often got into firefights with the Viet Cong in sampans or along the shore line. The first line of support for the Swift Boats would normally be the Sea Wolves when there was trouble, however, they accepted assistance from anyone with any firepower. On one particular dark night without a moon the tower or 199th operations directed me to river coordinates where a Swift Boat was in a fight with Viet Cong. On the shoreline automatic weapons fire was being directed from Viet Cong positions toward the Swift Boat and the Swift Boat was returning 50 calibre fire toward the enemy positions. The only visual from about the 800 foot altitude was the tracer fire. No black boat on the black water and no black pajamas on the black shore line- just muzzle flashes and yellow and green tracers. After contact with the boat, they requested suppressive M-60 and 2.75 rocket fire into the Viet Cong positions. The boat continued its fire with its 50 calibre machine gun and other automatic weapons from the center of the tributary and I worked the Bird Dogs rockets and M-60s parallel to the shoreline and into their muzzle flashes. As the rockets impacted, their flashes provide enough light for me to see the boat but not enough to see the Viet Cong in the tree line along the shore. The Bird Dog's eight rockets were enough to stop the Viet Cong on this very dark night. The Swift Boat was able to break contact and get out of a touchy situation with the help of a little armed Bird Dog with a bite. We said goodnight and both returned to our respective bases. Once again no knowledge of damages was determined. I did learn that I'd rather be in a dark sky than on the dark water.

ARVN Fort Support: Rather than beginning with “A dark and stormy night”, as Snoopy's did in the Peanuts cartoon, this night began, as most flights did, dark and quiet until Tower or 199th Operations. provided coordinates of an ARVN outpost under attack by a force of about 50 Viet Cong. When I arrived at about 1000feet I observed fire coming into the outpost from a tree line about 100-150 yards away from the outpost. The incoming fire was about double the outgoing fire. I was unable to make contact with the outpost but it was obvious they were receiving more than they were giving. I expended all of my rockets and 7.62 ammo with little effect on the attackers, but was able to make contact with a Air Force C-47 Spooky Gun Ship that was about 10 minutes away. He turned inbound to my location and upon arrival stated he couldn't see anything. I asked his altitude and he stated “8000eet.”. I gently informed him that the view was much better between 500 and a1000 feet and if he would join me at about 1500 feet I'd make sure he could see the bad guys location. As he adjusted to a new altitude I flashed my navlights on and the tree line erupted with tracer fire coming at and behind me. The Viet Cong didn't know Spooky was there and he hosed the tree line with the side firing mini guns on several passes. All was now quiet and dark again. The fort was secure and Spooky and I said goodnight and as with the Swift Boat we both returned to our starting points of Saigon for him and Vinh Long for me. This was a special experience for me as I had worked on the development of the Spooky project when I was assigned with the 1st Air Commando Wing at Hurlburt Field, Florida in 1964-65. This was the first time I had seen the system at work in anger. Very impressive

Asleep At The Switch: On one long boring night flight following a very intense week of long days and several night flights, I was extremely tired and flying a Bird Dog that was rigged to perfection by the maintenance crew. Flying with the windows open you could induce a turn to the right or left by placing your arm and hand out the window into the slipstream. This was a “no happening night” and I was burning fuel and watching the moonlight glide along the river and rice paddies. AFVN was on one radio and the FM's were silent. I was having a difficult time staying alert and my eyes closed for “only a moment”. I opened them and noticed that the river looked strange, the city lights looked strange, the canals were strange and the tree lines and fields were out of place. Now being a very bright boy, I quickly realized something had happened and my first clue was the ADF needle pointing northwest combined with this strange but yet familiar landscape below. Then, the realization of what had happened occurred. I had fallen asleep on a southwest heading and had awakened over Can Tho. Now, very alert I turned back to a northeast heading and followed the needle to Vinh Long. This experience made me very aware of the requirement of adequate crew rest and the benefit of a well rigged a/c. Thanks Swamp Fox Maintenance.

The Captured Mini Gun: One Night Patrol, we were watching for a captured mini gun that intelligence thought was mounted on a sampan in our area. Ron Fishburn was on a late evening flight working the suspected sector . I relieved him just after dark and as we were flying parallel about ¼ mile apart he yelled over the radio, “Dan, Get out of there”. At the same time my cockpit lit up with the light of tracers and a wall of fire that appeared to be the width of a fifty gallon drum passing in the space encompassed by my right flap, fuselage and right horizontal stabilizer. I rolled left and into a dive as another burst missed by a much wider margin. Ron and I both landed with shaking knees, realizing just how fortunate we had been . He had been in the exact spot I was in and had been there for many more minutes than I had. I suppose it took the sampan crew a few minutes to prep the gun. As Ron departed the area I had moved in. His warning had given me the few moments to escape the 2nd burst. Flying really is hours of boredom interspersed with moments of sheer terror. We made sure the next night flight stayed clear of that area. I cannot remember any details about later helicopter gunship searches for the sampan. I do know we were never attacked again by the mini gun.

Dan Aldridge