

The General Support Platoon, 199th RAC, 1967-68

After arriving in the Mekong Delta area of Vietnam in mid-1968, the 199th Company command element apparently decided that a fourth, or general support platoon was needed to provide night cover for all the unit assets based at Vinh Long Airfield. This decision was probably reached because of the relative ineffectiveness in preventing nighttime mortar attacks exhibited by the aviation elements previously based there. It proved to be a sound concept. There doesn't appear to be any documentation extant regarding this reorganization; it almost certainly did not entail a TOE change.

GS Platoon members called their organization Glory and Sunshine, with tongue in cheek. They expected neither, flying most of their missions in the dark. The platoon's first commander was Captain (later Major and, ultimately, Brigadier General) Richard G. Capps. In December 1967, a rash of promotions to field grade sent a newly minted Major Larry Joyce from Third Platoon command to an assignment at higher headquarters. In turn, Major Capps returned to command the Third Herd and Captain Charles W. Baker (the present author) left a Third Platoon Section Leader position to command the Black Sheep of Glory and Sunshine.

In December 1967, the GS Platoon was manned by a handful (4-5) of green aviators and cast off mechanics. It was tasked to respond to night cover and other company missions by Company Operations, leading to frequent friction between the platoon leader and the operations officer. When the existing operations officer moved on to greener pastures, the platoon leader was assigned operations as well – eliminating the potential for conflict between the two assignments.

The GS never had more than five aircraft assigned to it at one time. One of these was the six-place light cargo/utility U-6A Beaver. The four O-1G's assigned were a constantly changing cast of characters, as were the aviators. New aviators were assigned to the GS as a matter of policy. Its Platoon Leader was a unit IP (as most were at the time) and generally gave local orientation rides and area checkouts to newly-arrived aviators. This became a more extended and problematic process as aviators trained on the T-41 (Cessna 172) for primary flight training began arriving. They barely knew how to fly the Birddog much less use it tactically. The T-41 was one of the worst Army Aviation ideas to ever see the light of day.

While assigned to the GS Platoon, every aviator had a major additional company duty (supply officer, etc.). As they moved on to line platoons, they did so with more skill and circumspection than they would otherwise have possessed. They probably would have filled in at some sector strip along the way and may even have believed that they had maneuvered themselves into more exciting assignments. Right!

About half the night missions were flown by the handful of GS pilots and half by company headquarters personnel (CO, XO, OPS, Maint., etc.). The Operations Officer / GS Platoon Leader usually produced the flight schedule, gained HQS approval and then notified and negotiated with the aviators as necessary. Every effort was made to "share

the wealth” and everyone was most cooperative. It was easier to sleep in the Vinh Long Airfield compound when you knew a competent comrade was providing night cover and directing fire support resources (attack helicopters, AC-47 Spooky gunships, etc.) to good effect.

GS aircraft had a standard O-1G configuration. Because of the extra weight and moment involved in carrying the flares that denied Charlie the night, there was no room for machine gun or other weapons experimentation. The four rockets carried were always high explosive ones; WP (smoke) rockets being a waste of time for army aviators as long as smoke grenades were available. GS aviators were encouraged to develop more imaginative procedures and relationships with fire support resources and surrounding advisory teams. It was not uncommon for the GS pilot on a mission to know the first name of the advisor he was supporting and the gunship team leader he was directing.

The unit histories for the 199th RAC are admittedly skimpy and almost non-existent after 1969. There is no extant documentation that the GS Platoon existed after the present author departed in mid-1968.

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