

reunion

with AN OLD

By Tom Pilsch, '65

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Reunions of Vietnam War veterans normally are not a big deal, but this June I had a get-together with a war buddy that was a little different. The “buddy” was an airplane, one of the actual O-2s I flew as a forward air controller at Hué during 1968 and 1969. The best part was, I even got to fly her again.

As so many stories go today, we met on the Internet. Actually, her current owner found me.

In the Fall of 2001 I was asked to talk to a class at Georgia Tech in Atlanta on the history of the Vietnam War. My preparation for this lecture opened memories not touched in three decades. I wanted to talk about air operations in Vietnam from the limited perspective of a FAC in one little corner of the war. It quickly became apparent that there was no way to cover even the high points in 50 minutes, so I built a supplemental Web site (www.cc.gatech.edu/fac/Thomas.Pilsch/AirOps).

The site contains a picture of me with an O-2A captioned with its tail number, 67-21309. In February I received an e-mail from a man in California who told me, “I’m the current owner of that aircraft!” He purchased the plane in 1999 and was doing a Web search to learn more about its history when he stumbled onto my site. What an incredible stroke of luck! The airplane is based at Zamperini Field in Torrance, CA, and the owner, Mitch Taylor, invited me out to fly with him sometime. In June I took him up on the offer.

Prior to my trip from Atlanta to California for the reunion, I spent a lot of time poring through my personal logbook from the war period. What a walk down memory lane that was.

I arrived in Vietnam in April 1968, less than three years aftgraduation from the Academy. It had been a busy three years: pilot training at Williams AFB, a tour in C-130s at Langley AFB and then FAC training and a checkout in the O-1 Bird Dog at Hurlburt Field en route to Southeast Asia.

Once in Vietnam I was assigned to fly the O-2A Skymaster with the 20th Tactical Air Support Squadron. My duty station would be Hué. This news was greeted with mixed emotions. The good news

was the airplane. It was new to the war, a version of the civilian Cessna 337 modified for the FAC mission. I had heard a lot about its twin-engine reliability and heavier load capacity, and I was eager to fly it. The bad news was I also had heard a lot about Hué. After Saigon, it probably was the best-known South Vietnamese city since it was the scene of a bloody battle in the 1968 Tet offensive less than three months prior. Despite my initial misgivings, the assignment turned out to be a very positive experience.

After an in-country O-2 checkout at Phan Rang AB, I arrived at Hué in early May 1968 and joined a tactical air control party of about 20 people: forward air controllers, communicators, maintainers and intel support. We were attached to a Military Advisory Command Vietnam (MACV) advisory team to provide air support for the South Vietnamese 1st Division and the local forces in the northern two provinces of Vietnam. My call sign was Trail 32.

We lived in the MACV compound at Hué, one of only two areas in the city not overrun by the North Vietnamese Army during the Tet fighting. Even though the officers bunked in an old French military billet, we still were living Army-style and definitely noticed

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the different perspectives of the services on creature comforts. To put it into perspective, the Air Force people at Hué looked forward to spending a night at Da Nang when we had to drop an airplane off for maintenance (People assigned to Da Nang during the war will appreciate this!). This experience did, however, teach me that no matter how bad things seemed, somebody always had it worse. The Army advisors we supported always seemed so glad to return to the compound after several weeks in the field with a Vietnamese unit. Creature comforts are relative.

Our O-2s were based at the Hué Citadel airfield located in the Imperial palace grounds across the Perfume River from the compound. Getting to and from our airplanes was a challenge since the two bridges across the river had been dropped during the Tet fighting, and we had to drive our jeeps down and up one of the collapsed spans. The runway was short for the O-2 (2,600 feet), and a watchtower on the Citadel walls directly off the north end of the runway made for some sporty heavy weight takeoffs. My initial enthusiasm over the twin-engine performance of the Sky-master proved to be somewhat premature. With its heavy communications suite, two full pods of rockets and a full load of fuel in the hot and humid conditions of Southeast Asia, the airplane was not a stellar performer. Someone said that the main difference between losing an engine in the single-engine O-1 and the twin O-2 was that with the O-2 you had a slightly larger area from which to select a crash site.

There were six airplanes assigned to our detachment, and we flew whichever one happened to be available. Individual FACs had no association or attachment to any particular tail number, yet in reviewing my logbook I was struck by the number of memorable missions I had flown in 67-21309. Some of these “memory missions” were deadly serious, others humorous, but all brought back poignant memories of what was a pivotal experience in my life and the lives of my classmates and contemporaries.

One of these memory missions with 309 came in June 1968, early in my tour. I was flying in support of a battalion of the 1st ARVN Division during an operation along the coast just south of the demilitarized zone. The Vietnamese unit came under heavy fire from a large North Vietnamese Army force dug in along a tree line near the town of Gia Linh. The American advisor was desperate for air support. I put out a “troops in contact” call to the tactical air control network, and the airpower started coming my way.

What followed was probably the busiest two hours of my tour, but it seemed to go by in a flash. I was talking nearly continuously on three radios with the incoming fighters, the ground advisor and the tactical air control net that was feeding me the fighters. As each pair of fighters checked in, I talked them into my location and briefed them on the tactical situation. When they verified that they had the target area and me in sight and were ready to start their runs, I rolled in to put a white phosphorous smoke marking rocket exactly where I wanted the ordnance. This usually stirred up the ground fire since the North Vietnamese knew what was coming their way, but it also helped me confirm exactly where I wanted the bombs.

A friendly fire incident was always the biggest fear of every FAC. In an effort to make sure that the ordnance did not go in the wrong place, I tried to orbit over the friendly forces after I had marked the target and as the fighters made their runs. This could be

particularly critical when the visibility was marginal, but this day the weather was good.

As each fighter completed a pass, I radioed the wingman a new aiming point from the previous impact as I tried to walk the ordnance along the tree line. That day I worked six sets of Air Force and Marine fighters with a variety of weapons: napalm, rockets and Snakeye high drag bombs. These last were for low altitude delivery and were very effective against dug in troops. They did, however, spread shrapnel over a large area and could be a hazard to nearby friendly forces. I told the ground advisor to keep his troops’ heads down as the Marine A-4s rolled in with the Snakeyes.

The last set of fighters that day was a pair of F-105 Thunderchiefs with their 20 mm cannon ammunition still left after a mission up north. This was a rare opportunity since we did not normally see the “Thuds” in South Vietnam. The fire from their Vulcan cannons provided the coup de grace for the North Vietnamese resistance. I could hear the cheering in Vietnamese in the background when the advisor called to thank me.

This mission in 309 was the longest of my tour, 4 hours and 20 minutes, and I had to drop into the Marine base at Quang Tri to get enough gas to make it home to Hué.

I wasn’t thinking about this mission a couple of days later when I was sitting in the bar hooch at the Hué compound having a beer with some of the other FACs. In walked this dirty, scraggly looking Army captain right out of the field. He came over and said, “Who’s Trail 32?” Expecting the worst (I had hit some of his troops?), I took a deep breath and replied, “That’s me.”

“Let me buy you a beer,” he said. “You did some great work up at Gia Linh. You saved our [tails].” That moment, one of the high points of my tour, typified what made being a FAC such a tremendous experience. Working with some great professionals from all services under dif-

difficult circumstances and being able to see your contribution to the team was what it was all about.

My last flight in 309 was on April 6, 1969. Six days later I made my last flight in an O-2 en route to Da Nang to catch a flight back to the U.S. at the end of my tour.

Fast forward 33 years to June 2002, Torrance, California and my reunion with 309. Mitch and I had arranged to meet at noon Sunday. I had arrived in California the day before and drove by Zamperini Field at dusk to make sure I could find it, but really I wanted to see the airplane. And what a thrill it was. Walking around that old friend on the quiet ramp as the shadows began to lengthen brought back more memories than I had anticipated. It was only a machine, but that machine and others like her and other guys like me had formed a bond many years ago and half a world away. Some of those memories seemed so far away and others seemed like they happened only yesterday. We all had been through a lot together.


I joined up with Mitch Taylor the next day and took an immediate liking to him. He is not a vet but is very interested in the Vietnam War and the role his airplane played in it. He has done a lot of research into the history of 67-21309 including digging out her complete maintenance records. Mitch even has two pods with wooden rockets that he hangs on the wings for air shows, but he is understandably a little nervous about flying around with them over a major metropolitan area in light of heightened security concerns.

I was surprised at how good an O-2 looks when it is clean and with a glossy paint job—not the typical SEA forward operating location look! Mitch takes a lot of pride in her and it shows. The airplane is in near-mint condition with all the original military radios and other equipment. Inside it was exactly as I remember including gun sight, armament panel and even a canvas seat back smoke grenade holder turned out by some parachute shop.

The attached photos do not do justice to how good 309 looks. There is no question she has held up better over the years than I have, but then she has had both engines rebuilt, new props, and major cosmetic surgery (including 50 bullet hole patches). I am still on the original equipment all around—and no bullet holes!

If seeing 309 again was a thrill, then flying her was off the scale! The day of the flight was a typical sunny Southern California summer afternoon—perfect for flying. We went out and around Santa Catalina Island and then down the coast to San Clemente and back, doing a little visual reconnaissance along the beach and checking out a few sampans. A great experience! I was surprised at how much more nimble the O-2 was without the rocket pods and a full load of gas, even with two non-standard weight pilots aboard. Maybe it just seemed that way because plane and pilot both were glad to be together again.

My flight back in time was a special experience, one that I wish all people who have flown good airplanes under extraordinary circum-

stances could share. More important, though, was the opportunity it gave me to reflect on events of thirty years ago, our brothers and sisters who did not return from Southeast Asia and the unanswerable question of why was I so lucky. My reunion and the recollections it triggered have helped me to refocus on keeping alive the memories of those who did not make it back from the war. We all owe them that. 

Princeton Review Ranks Academy Among Nation's Best Universities

BY JOHN VAN WINKLE, ACADEMY SPIRIT

The U.S. Air Force Academy is the best run college, has the nation's best collegiate library and the nation's most accessible professors, and consequently its cadets never stop studying, according to *The Princeton Review*.

The Princeton Review compiles student surveys for its annual publication, "The Best 345 Colleges."

Information for the review is compiled from almost 100,000 on-line surveys of randomly-chosen students at 345 American colleges and universities, and is the largest on-going poll of student opinions of their colleges.

The survey asks students to rank their schools in 62 individual categories. Listed below are the results:

- First place in the category of "the students never stop studying."
- First in the nation in professor availability.
- Sixth toughest university to gain admission to.
- Third in best overall academic experience for undergraduates.
- Best Academy's Cadet Library in the nation
- Organization operates as the best in the nation.
- Second in "everyone plays intramural sports."
- Seventh nationally in having a "great college newspaper." (The survey couldn't specify if cadets meant the now-departed *Warrior Update*, the enigmatic *Dodo*, or the *Academy Spirit*.)
- Third in "stone-cold sober school," and number two in the low alcohol consumption.
- 12th "most beautiful campus"
- 10th best food among the 345 universities that were ranked.

All of these factors combine to give the Academy the number three ranking in "best overall academic experience" for undergraduates.

For information on the *Princeton Review* survey, visit www.review.com/college/rankings.cfm.