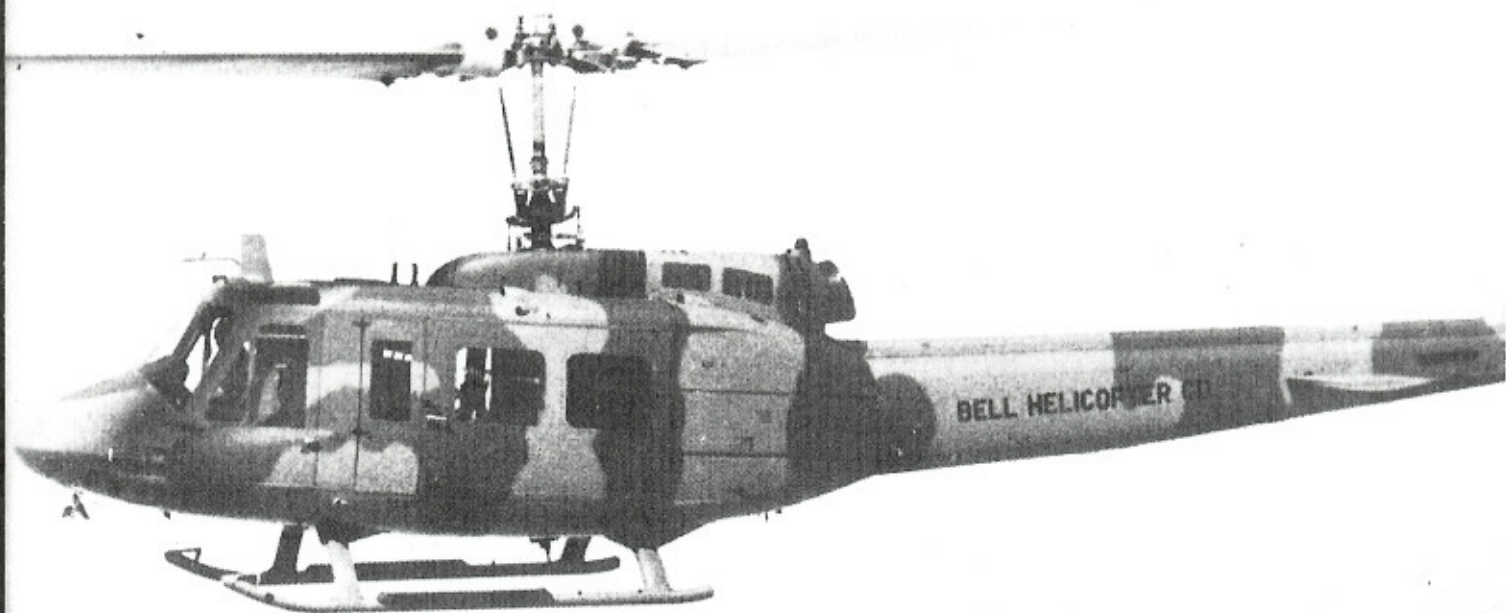


# Army Aviation

JULY, 1973

## Big Brother

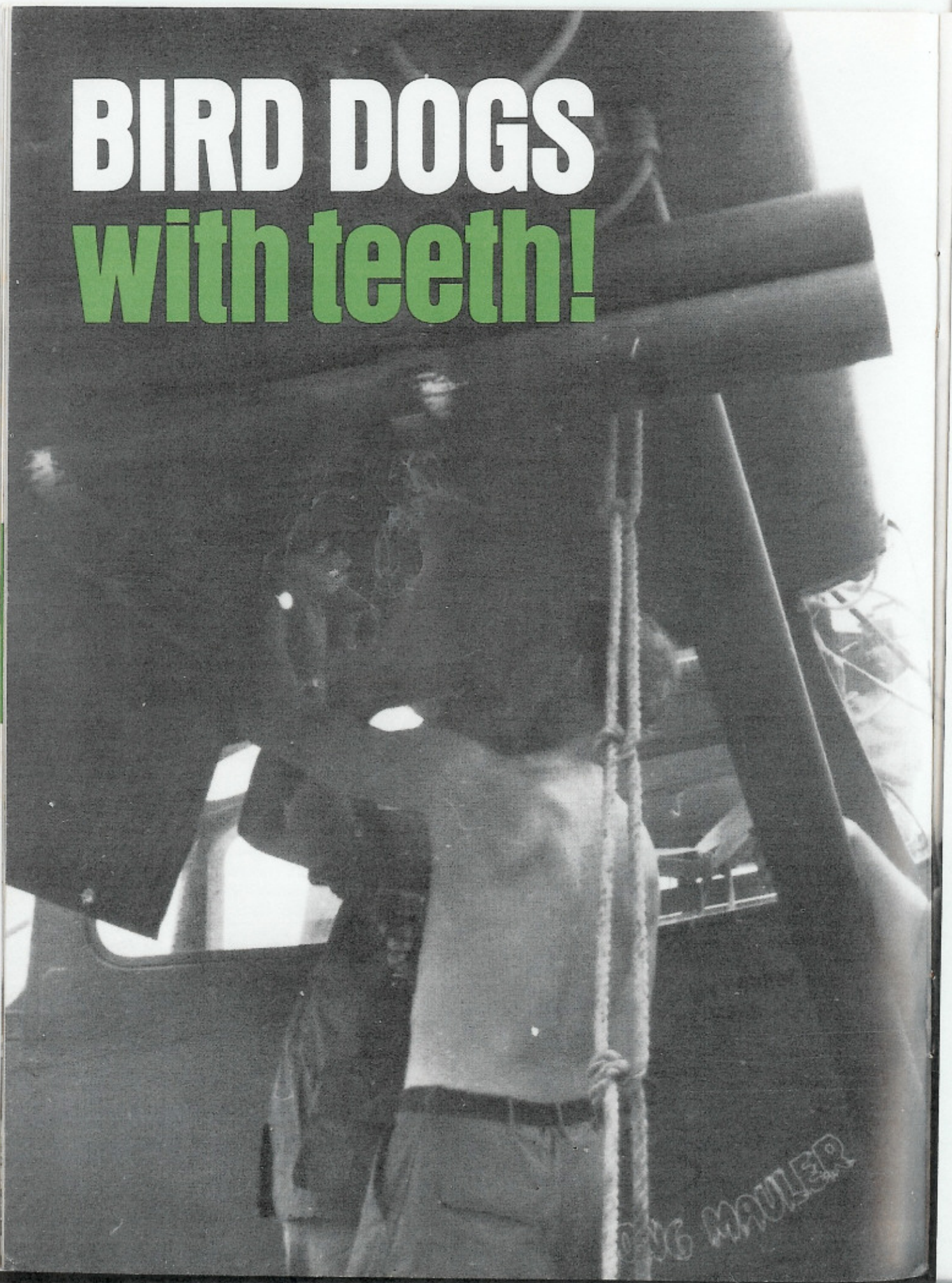
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 **AVCO**  
LYCOMING DIVISION

STRATFORD, CONNECTICUT 06497

# BIRD DOGS with teeth!



BOB MAWLER

**W**HILE the subject of O-1 *Bird Dogs* has always been controversial, these aircraft played an important role in combat in South Vietnam, and I'd like to record many of their noteworthy accomplishments here.

Beginning with the "*Old Lady*," as the Viet Minh called the French precursor of the O-1, these aircraft provided an effective means of expanding allied influence over the enemy. Outstanding air-to-ground communications permitted us to take excellent advantage of available artillery, fighters, and gunships. The protective bunkers that pockmark the enemy's trails and base areas provide mute testimony to the effectiveness of this well-directed firepower.

Unfortunately, the *Bird Dogs* sometimes found the enemy to be out of the artillery range and beyond the reasonable response distance of gunships. Sometimes in the middle of an operation the enemy were observed running to safety just a tree line away from friendly troops when the artillery and gunships were otherwise engaged. Occasionally, lucrative targets of opportunity, such as a sampan convoy or several hundred enemy troops, were able to disperse before requested fire support arrived.

The frequently sighted small targets, a single sampan or one to three men, seldom warranted the firing of artillery or the launching of gunships. These failures to engage difficult-to-discover enemy were very frustrating for *Bird Dog* aviators.

Shortly before the Tet period in 1968 the 1st Aviation Brigade authorized two O-1 units in the

Delta to fabricate and employ armament which included rockets, machine guns, and flares. Prior to that time the policy concerning the O-1 arming reversed itself as frequently as units changed commanders.

The reasons for the decision were the following:

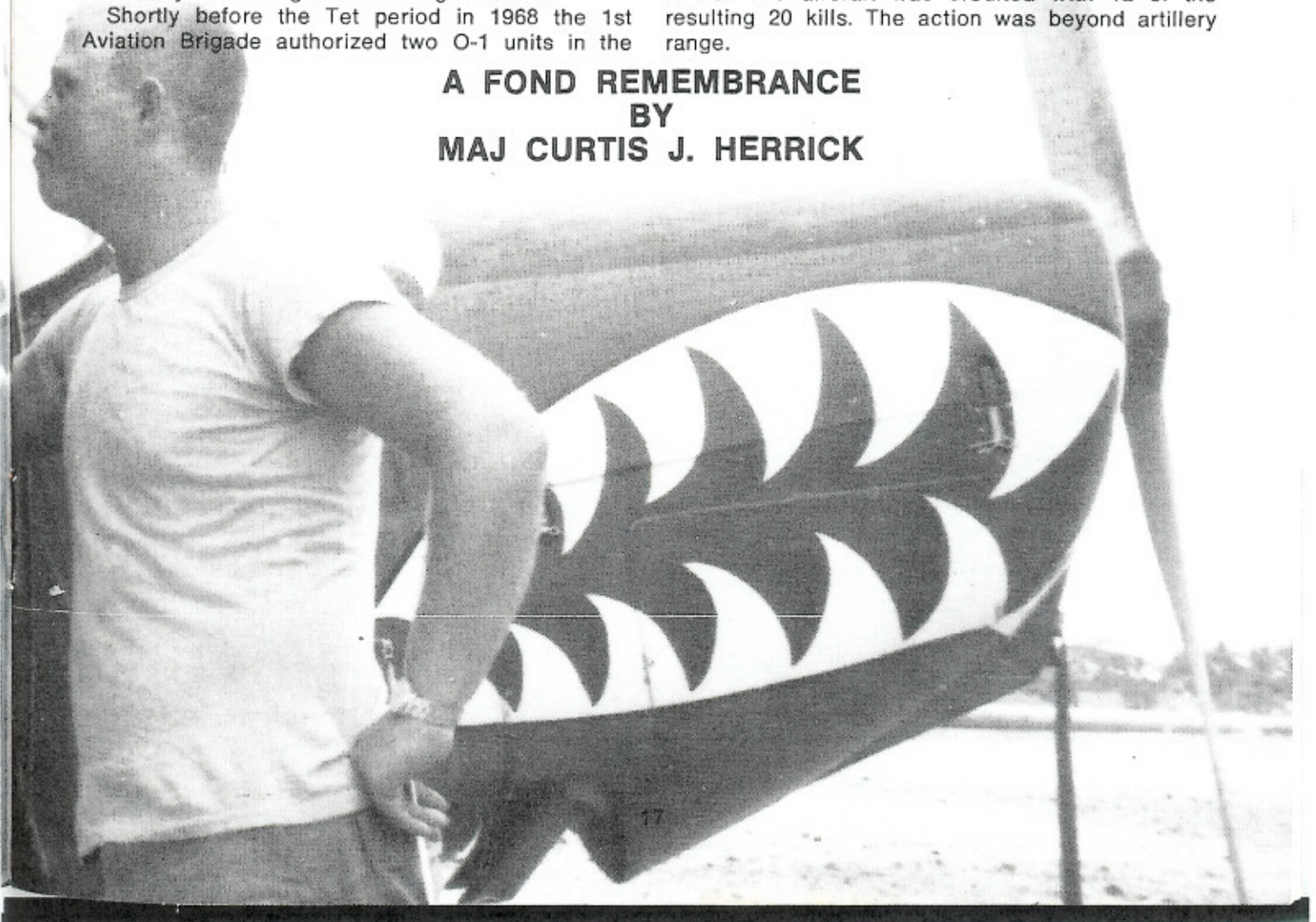
- To allow small, often fleeting targets to be engaged. These were frequently out of artillery range and not worth launching gunships.
- To give the *Bird Dogs* the capability to support combat operations on a special situation basis.
- To give the aircraft a limited capability to hold the enemy at bay until adequate fire support could arrive.

While establishing the technical feasibility of some of the improvised weapon systems, the concept won its acceptance on the battlefield. The following are some examples of how the armed *Bird Dogs* did their job.

Seventeen of some 20 enemy at an infrastructure meeting were killed by a surprise O-1 rocket run. An aviator and his Vietnamese observer were given this mission because of their knowledge of the area. The *Bird Dog* was selected because of its ability to cluster its rockets tightly around the area of one house.

Later, the same aviator firing wing machine guns and rockets held an enemy platoon in a small clump of trees until a popular force platoon could arrive. The aircraft was credited with 12 of the resulting 20 kills. The action was beyond artillery range.

## A FOND REMEMBRANCE BY MAJ CURTIS J. HERRICK



## BIRD DOGS WITH TEETH!

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Another O-1 employing rockets and a pedestal-mounted machine gun held an enemy battalion in a banana orchard until fighters could arrive. The O-1 happened onto the enemy as they were moving away from a successful ambush in a column of two's. The *Bird Dog* downed six of the enemy.

In the night defense of Vinh Long airfield, patrolling O-1's on several occasions were able to suppress enemy mortar attacks to just a few rounds. The aircraft dove immediately at the mortar tube flashes, dropping flares and firing rockets.

During the Tet street fighting, a *Bird Dog* employing its rockets destroyed a 57mm recoilless rifle and crew. The enemy had been positioning their gun in the middle of a street to ambush an approaching armored personnel carrier.

Later, during the battle of Tet, an O-1 armed with 12 rockets responding immediately to a distress call managed to blow a track off a captured M113. The enemy had been rumbling south from Can Tho along Route 4 systematically destroying friendly outposts. Popular force soldiers were then able to incinerate the immobilized armored vehicle.

When considering the other side of the armed O-1 issue, a number of disadvantages are often pointed out.

- The aviators would pursue targets with their guns, rather than performing their reconnaissance assignments properly.
- Traditionally, reconnaissance aircraft have not been armed.
- Armed O-1's would be subject to greater battle damage.
- Armament weight, spent cartridges, and weapon recoil could cause the aircraft to be more vulnerable to accidents and structural failures.

Despite these limitations, the two reconnais-

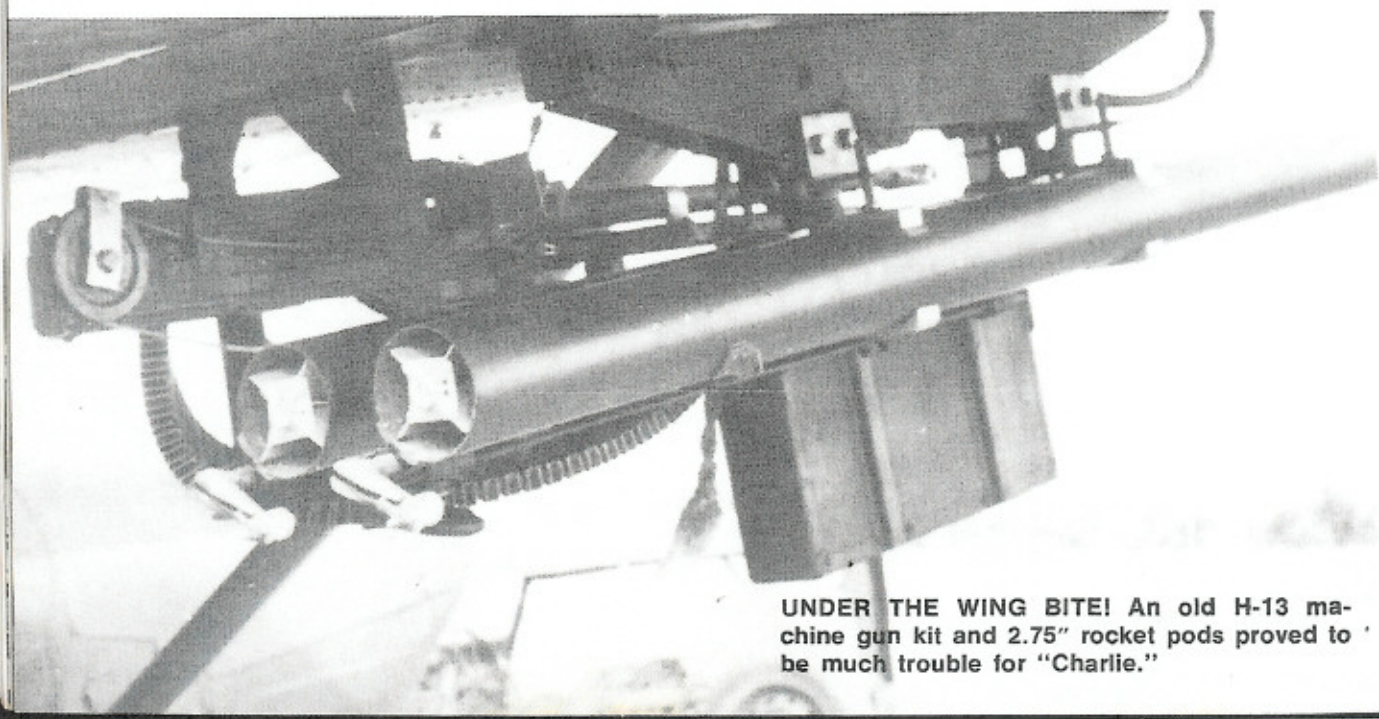
sance airplane companies with armed O-1's were more than equal to the challenge. The aviation companies carefully oriented their new aviators to combat flight conditions with the Delta aviators becoming specialists in their area of operations. The sector aviators often reported directly to a province senior advisor and controlled their own airfields. They developed a keen understanding of the importance of their reconnaissance tasks.

These aviators built a highly professional reputation in the eyes of the advisors by the cool manner with which they controlled supporting fires. In some actions these O-1 pilots directed the fires of armed helicopters, artillery, naval ships, and fighter aircraft as well as the fires of their own aircraft. On the ground they lived with the men they could conceivably injure by accident.

The need for arming reconnaissance aircraft has been recognized with the arming of the LOH and the USAF's *Bronco*. The *Bird Dog* aviators' normal missions are often over remote areas where only the foolhardy would unnecessarily expose their aircraft to enemy fire. Most aviators began climbing from gun runs at 1,000 feet. The beaten zone created by two wing-mounted M60 machineguns in the time required to dive from 2,000 to 1,000 feet is adequate.

Beyond the load of four rockets, each aircraft was treated as if it had the disposition of a woman. The company maintenance officer, the safety officer, and the aircraft's aviator carefully calculated each *Bird Dog's* weight and balance. The ability of the aircraft to carry its combat load was verified during test flights. Any changes in stall, cruise, and climb speeds were carefully noted before the aircraft were released for combat operations. No aircraft structural failures were noted.

The armament systems used during this period were visualized and fabricated by aviators who all too often had watched the enemy saunter unhindered to safety. Some of the ideas were new.



**UNDER THE WING BITE!** An old H-13 machine gun kit and 2.75" rocket pods proved to be much trouble for "Charlie."

Others were adaptations of jury rig systems that had been left by reassigned aviators.

One pilot pared down the M-2 nitrogen-charged machine gun kit developed for the H-13 helicopter to fit the *Bird Dog* wing. Using 2.75" rocket brackets and intervalometers designed by the Air Force, he was able to mount four rockets and an M60 machine gun with 600 rounds on each wing.

A third hard spot on each wing discovered by reading the O-1 technical manual, was used in mounting the machine gun. A company maintenance officer manufactured similar but less sophisticated machine gun systems for many of the aircraft in his company. Pull cables routed around pulleys and down the wing into the cockpit were used to recharge the wing guns and place them on safe.

Stock iron, cut aluminum from the USS Corpus Christi Bay, HU-1C ammunition boxes, and salvaged intervalometers were used to build rocket and gun mounts. Plastic rear sights for the guns and rockets were attached to the bottom of the magnetic compass. For front sights, rods with a sight ring were mounted on the engine cowling. It was not uncommon to see crew chiefs raising the tail of the *Bird Dogs* in order to boresight the wing guns and rocket tubes with the aiming marks at infinity down the length of the runway.

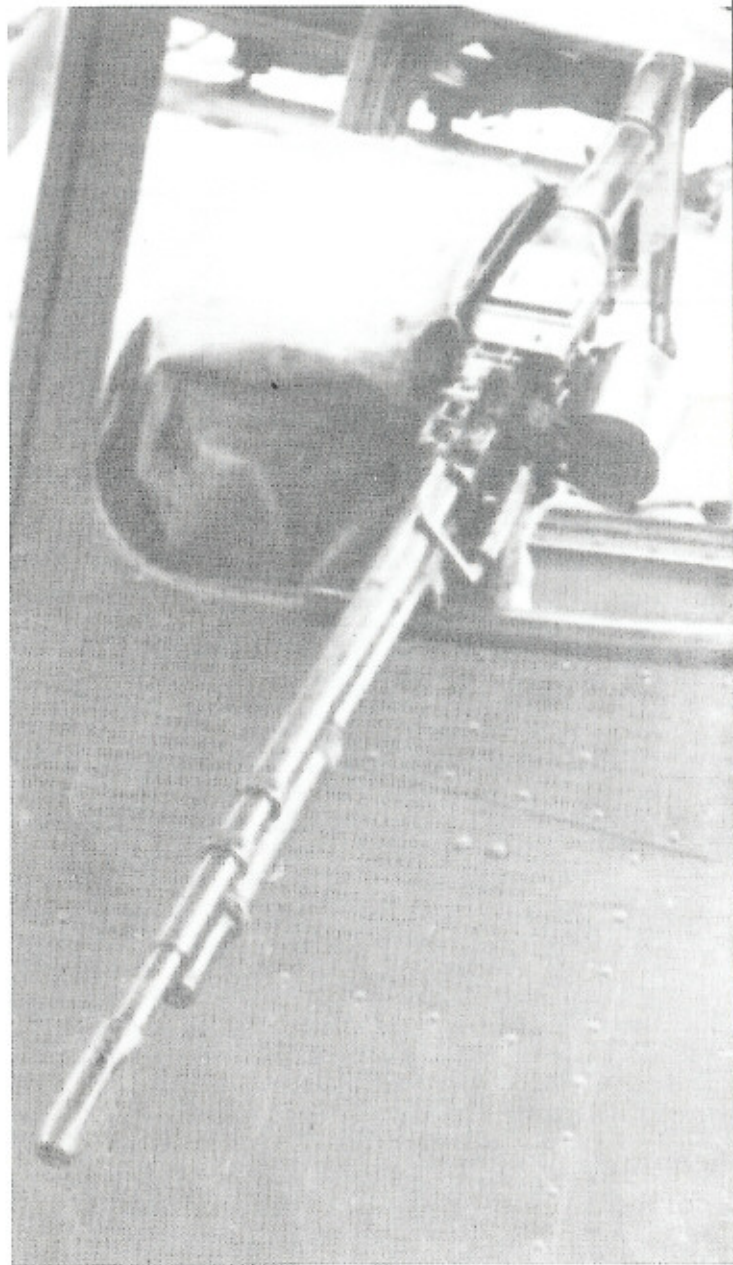
A third bomb shackle was mounted on each wing of the aircraft used for night airfield security. This allowed the carrying of four aerial flares and up to eight rockets. Cabin glare was reduced by placing visors on the instrument lights and eyebrow lights over the critical engine instrument gages.

For utility, a machine gun pedestal mount was fabricated for firing from the left rear window. The pedestal was mounted in the socket for the rear facing seat back. Stops on the mount prevented the gun from shooting the wing, the wheel, and the horizontal stabilizer.

A helicopter door gunner's M122 cartridge catching bag was cut down to fit the *Bird Dog*. The bag prevented spent cartridges from falling through the holes in the aircraft floor where they might bind the flight control cables. As one would expect, these systems required additional maintenance. Amazingly, though, once the ammunition chutes were properly adjusted, the machine gun systems became very reliable.

To attract emergency attention or to convince troops crowding a runway that the *Bird Dog* really wanted to land, sirens were mounted on wing struts of some aircraft. The bell of the siren was trimmed away to reduce flat plate area.

The results of this armament policy allowed the O-1's to capitalize on visible targets that otherwise would not have been engaged. During the Tet battle period the armed O-1's provided numerous economy of force fire elements. The monthly statistics of each of the *Bird Dog* companies of 30 and 36 airplanes compared creditably with that of a *Cobra* company. The *Bird Dog* radio transmission, "I'm rolling in on a gun run," earned respect.



**UTILITY WINDOW?** A pedestal mount, a used M122 cartridge catching bag, a tin can, and some stops so one doesn't shoot the wing or your pilot, and you've got yourself one hell of a utility window!

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MAJ Curtis J. Herrick is presently the XO of the 227th Avn Bn; 1st Cavalry Div, Ft Hood, TX. A graduate of the University of Hawaii, he entered flight school in 1966 following a ground tour in RVN. He later became platoon leader, Operations Officer, and XO of the 199th Reconnaissance Avn Co (*Bird Dogs*) during the units formation, movement to Vinh Long, and first six months of combat. A USAIS faculty member during 1968-71, he attended the CGSC during 1971-72.