

The Authorization of the Machine Gun Arming of USA Bird Dogs

The following is a generalized account of why and how the O-1s in the Vietnam Delta became sanctioned as machine gun armed aircraft by the USA's aviation leadership during late 1967 and Early 1968. It is offered for review and comment by any that wish to provide specific feedback.

The two Bird Dog unit commanders (221st RAC & 199th RAC) recognized that armed Bird Dogs could be a valuable asset in the Delta because the areas in which the O-1s operated were too far flung to receive timely fire support from more capable aircraft. The Bird Dog's guns could be utilized to engage visible targets for a longer period of time than if only rockets were carried. The 221st was the first to equip Bird Dogs with wing mounted guns in addition to the rockets. The individual that led the way within the Shotguns was CPT Ed Larson in 1967. He and SFC Barnett adapted a M-2 gun system to the O-1 that was originally on the OH-13 scout aircraft utilized by the 1st/9th Cav. Cline Preble had been a Shotgun pilot based at Vinh Long who transferred to the 199th upon its arrival and was familiar with the gun capability for the Bird Dog. The placement of a gun under additional Bird Dog wings was soon duplicated on many Shotgun and Swamp Fox aircraft.

This was accomplished within the 199th due to a large supply of M-60s surprisingly becoming available. With the can do attitude and know-how of maintenance personnel, coupled with the perfecting by CPT Preble; the Swamp Fox leadership understood the improved mission capability and began to arm almost all of the unit's O-1s with guns.

A chance meeting between a Shotgun pilot (CPT Rau) and the Commander of the 1st Aviation Brigade on the Can Tho airfield ramp in late 1967, led to the official authorization for arming the O-1s with a machine gun capability. The reality that armed Bird Dogs existed was explained up the chain of command, reviewed by the leadership of the 13th CAB, 307th CAB, the 164th Avn Gp and the 1st Avn Bde. GEN Williams, commander of the 1st Avn Bde, provided a formal letter of approval in early 1968 to the Commander of the 164th Avn Gp. The "AO-1" was formally "recognized" at an awards ceremony that was held in Soc Trang in early 1968. GEN Williams attended, awards were given to pilots who had utilized the machine gun in the performance of their missions, and Bird Dogs were on the ramp to also be recognized for their part in the deeds. They were ready anytime they were call upon to provide a more responsive means of light fire support within the Delta's remote areas of operation.

Thanks to a few individuals (pilots, crew chiefs & maintenance personnel) with initiative, and commanders that gave approval to this endeavor; the role and value of the Bird Dogs in the RVN Delta was improved. The VC certainly became more appreciative of the presence and capability of the Bird Dog. A special salute goes to GEN Williams for his authorizing role in this endeavor.

There is a another aspect of this tale that merits addressment. The USAF opposed the USA equipping the Bird Dog with wing mounted machine guns. By the end of 1968, movement was

afoot to officially rescind the approval of the armed Bird Dogs; not due to the risk/reward considerations; but simply because the USAF did not approve of the role that was being performed by the USA Bird Dogs and their pilots. The USAF wanted the machine guns removed from all USA Bird Dogs. However, this stance did not include the arming of USAF with anything other than marking rockets. The USAF did not have a sanctioned program to arm its Bird Dogs to fill this mission void in outlying areas. The actual delivery of “gun ordinance” was to be left to strike aircraft, and in the case of the USA, armed helicopters. USA tactical fixed-wing aircraft was to be restricted to “observation”, surveillance and liaison capabilities.

As a result, since rockets were accepted as armament on all Bird Dogs, some individual pilots had begun to equip their Bird Dogs with additional rockets, in lieu of the gun. The RAC units began to install larger rocket pods under the wings of some aircraft. Individual pilots who preferred more rockets created their own local rocket pod capability. The most common configuration utilized an XM-158 seven-rocket pod, one under each wing. The USAF reluctantly accepted these Bird Dogs because rockets were part of all Bird Dog observation missions, and the improved rocket capability did not strain the formal inter-service agreements.

There were also some Bird Dog pilots that did not like the MG on their particular aircraft because it jammed too often. Others indicated that too often the gun was continuously being fired (lack of short bursts) and the wing attaching points were being over stressed. The availability and capability of 17# HE and flechette warheads w/ VT fuses were a distinct improvement if the Bird Dogs were armed only with rockets. By late 1969 and early 1970, most of the machine guns had been removed from the 199th Bird Dogs do to the wing stress concerns by aircraft maintenance personnel. It is expected that this part of the story can be expanded upon. It is specifically requested that anyone having reliable knowledge of additional information to please provide the information, as indicated below.

Note: The key individuals that participated in the O-1 MG arena know who they are and the role they played in the process. They can tell their own version of the Bird Dogs tale via personal accounts of their experiences. Others who desire to add to the above accounting should do so via contact as indicated below.

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