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“Who Were Those Guys? THE PLAYBOYS”

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Who Were Those Guys? THE PLAYBOYS!

by Col J.L. Adkinson

*They were fighter pilots, scooter drivers,
RIOs and RSOs. They were Marines doing
their jobs as best they could.*

This is the story of a brief but intense period of activity by 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (MAW) aircrews known as the Playboys. They weren't nicknamed for their amorous escapades, at least not as a group. Rather, these highly professional and dedicated Marine TA-4F aircrewmembers earned a reputation for dependability and productivity in the skies above central Laos and the Vietnam border. Their effort was a refinement of the Marine Corps' use of jet aircraft for missions of visual reconnaissance (VR), naval gunfire/artillery spotting, and tactical air coordination (airborne) (TAC(A)) in the Vietnam War.

The Corps' use of jet aircraft for such missions began early in 1966 in order to provide TAC(A) in the face of fast-firing 23mm, 37mm, and 57mm anti-aircraft guns along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the A Shau Valley, central Laos and southwestern North Vietnam. Marine TAC(A) missions in that vicinity were originally flown by O-1 "Bird Dogs" and OV-10 "Broncos," but they were too vulnerable against heavy caliber gunfire. More importantly, these slow movers were desperately needed in other areas to provide close air support (CAS) for Marine units engaged in ground combat. Rather than dedicated TAC(A) missions, however, the early jet TAC(A) efforts were simply strikes under flight leader control where the flight leader would locate a predesignated target in Laos or North Vietnam and then act as the forward air controller (FAC) for his flight after delivering his ordnance.

The first dedicated Marine fast FAC/TAC(A) missions were flown in two-seat TF-9F Cougar jet aircraft along the floor of the A Shau Valley in western I Corps in late 1966. Though successful, the talented Cougar aircrewmembers were hampered

by the limited fuel endurance, agility, and communication capabilities of their swept-wing versions of the Korean War-vintage Panther aircraft. Also, they lacked the clear mission definition that would become the hallmark of the Playboys.

In August 1967, a two-seat A-4 Skyhawk, the TA-4F, was introduced to Vietnam. With its low-level capability, FM radio, and excellent rear seat visibility, the aircraft proved a superb vehicle for fast FAC operations. From the fall of 1967 and throughout 1968, these aircraft were used for two or three VR/TAC(A) missions a day. Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) 11 was at Da Nang, MAG-12 at Chu Lai (east), and MAG-13 at Chu Lai (west), each was assigned their own TA-4Fs. There was no formal procedure for the TA-4F crews to compare notes or effectively standardize procedures. However, these crews got the job done, including such demanding missions as coordinating the dozens of aircraft stacked up and awaiting roll-in clearances overhead besieged Khe Sanh and adjusting fire for the 16-inch guns of the USS *New Jersey* (BB 62) in North Vietnam's lower route packages.

When President Johnson halted the bombing of North Vietnam on 1 November 1968, he created a good news/bad news situation. On the one hand, airpower previously committed to deep-strike missions could be diverted to support troops engaged in the South; but on the other, North Vietnam became even more of a sanctuary for troops and supplies. This caused the Marines in I Corps to face an increasingly large and better equipped enemy supplied from the North. Marine Corps leaders countered by assigning the TA-4F aircrews to turn their full attention to enemy supply routes along the western edge of I Corps and central Laos. These were the main corridors for

Name	PB No.	Name	PB No.	Name	PB No.
Adkinson, J.L.	32	Henrich, C.R.	44	Ried, R.D.	26
Buckley, J.E.	27	Hebert, R.F.	01	Robinson, L.W. (KIA)	70
Buffington, J.C.	30	Isaly, D.K.	66	Schwab, W.F.	34
Chapman, P.W.	37	Jones, P.J.	62	Seder, T.D.	33
Clapp, R.G.	77	Jupp, W.A.	02	Sewell, S.J.	61
Connolly, R.P.	22	Kane, J.J.	15	Shea, S.F.	15
Crouch, K.L.	09	Light, B.R.	25	Smith, J.T.	Unk
DeFries, C.F.	20	Lewis, F.E.	61	Smith, K.A.	03
Gagen, J.A.	08	McCleskey, W.R.	58	Smith, W.R.	41
Garske, E.W.	88	Menning, F.A.	59	Spindler, D.D.	79
Gering, M.S.	05	Moore, E.R.	39	Stowers, R.M.	69
Griggs III, T.W.	48	Mills, W.W.	13	Swaby, D.R.	24
Green, M.P.	65	Miecznikowski, R.S.	71	Van Esselstyn, N.K.	37
Grissom, E.D.	75	Nelson, T.S.	90	Ward, G.W. (KIA)	12
Hanle, R.L.	04	Ostermann, G.A.	50	Weber, D.J.	06
Hauptfuhrer, H.B.	43	Page, D.D.	35	Wilson, W.B.	77
Hickerson, R.	26	Pospisil, D.L.	99	Willmarth, J.M.	55
Higgins, D.G.	17	Rasmussen, R.T.	45	Wills, D.A.	23
Hearney, R.D.	57	Richardson, M.L.	21	Wood, L.A.	68

the flow of enemy troops and equipment into South Vietnam and were the lifeline for the North Vietnamese regulars and Viet Cong guerrillas engaging Marines of the III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF). Ground commanders wanted to interdict this flow, making effective VR/TAC(A) a critical ingredient.

In January 1969, the commanding general of 1st MAW consolidated VR/TAC(A) efforts at Da Nang Air Base under the control of the commanding officer of MAG-11's Headquarters and Maintenance Squadron 11 (H&MS-11). The immediate result was an increase in support that TA-4F crews were able to provide the 9th Marine Regiment, which was then heavily engaged with North Vietnamese regulars in Operation DEWEY CANYON along the South Vietnam-central Laos border. Working in close coordination with Air Force F-100F "Misty" fast FAC aircrews, these TA-4F/observers contributed significantly to the 9th Marines' effort, one of the most successful American operations of the entire war. They helped identify enemy supply areas, locate and destroy heavy mortar and rocket positions, and provided a badly needed communications link, via FM radio, between strike aircraft and supported ground units. After-action reports of ground commanders in DEWEY CANYON strongly confirmed the fact that North Vietnamese artillery and mortars would not fire while U.S. air elements were in the vicinity.

As the spring of 1969 continued, the consolidated TA-4F effort (using the call sign "Manual FAC") established a routine of 200 sorties monthly to provide continuous daylight coverage of the "Steel Tiger" area in Laos (see Figure 1). Double and triple aerial refueling cycles with the KC-130F tanker aircraft from VMGR-152 made this possible. Often, during a particularly hot strike evolution on the trail or during a rescue (RESCAP) mission, a KC-130 crew

would fly their airborne gas station to where the action was to extend the on-station utility of the TA-4Fs.

In June 1969, LtCol Guy Badger, the H&MS-11 commanding officer, reorganized the TA-4F echelon, installing his executive officer, LtCol Richard Hebert, as VR/TAC(A) mission coordinator. This effectively formed a sub-unit within H&MS-11 totally dedicated to the mission. Dick Hebert changed the unit call sign to Playboy, after the F-4U Corsair aircrews that flew similar missions in the Korean War.

Playboy established a streamlined operations section devoted to careful management of crew



Figure 1.

All 3
Air Groups?



TA-4F cameras revealed cave complex (top) and trenches that marked enemy gun positions.

training, scheduling, and tactics refinement. It refined liaison lines with other air units operating in the Steel Tiger/Laos area. A reconnaissance, analysis, and intelligence dissemination (RAID) section was created near the group intelligence and photo imagery interpretation sections to use the intelligence capability of the RF-4B squadron. It solidified liaison lines with 1st MAW, III MAF, and 7/13th Air Forces. The TA-4F maintenance section was tailored by making it a dedicated sub-unit of the much larger maintenance organization with H&MS-11. This ensured

that TA-4Fs got proper attention while not interfering with the normal H&MS work on intermediate level maintenance for the Group's other aircraft and equipment. Playboy crews were equipped with quality 35mm cameras and 200mm lenses to verify strike results and collect intelligence data for strike planners.

A spring liaison conference with the U.S. Air Force resulted in a key program innovation, as Air Force Misty pilots and Playboy aircrews exchanged for a 7-10 day tour at Phu Cat and Da Nang. This program, made possible by Maj (now LtGen) Anthony McPeak, USAF, provided a minimum of five flights for Marine air crews in the F-100F and a comparable exchange in the TA-4F for Air Force F-100 pilots. The exchange, which continued through the summer, improved the performance of both Services on the trail in Laos and northwest area of South Vietnam.

Aircrew assets, previously drawn from multiple sources in the Da Nang area, were now largely centralized within H&MS-11 or on the group staff. However, several of the early Playboys were from Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 542, including 542's commanding officer, LtCol Keith Smith (now LtGen and currently DC/S for aviation at Headquarters Marine Corps. They flew daily TA-4F missions in addition to their F-4B sorties. Where a lack of standardization and mission familiarity previously existed, high levels of VR/TAC(A) proficiency became the norm. And esprit soared along with determination to contribute in a major way to the III MAF effort in I Corps.

The Playboy standard operating procedure (SOP) was essentially finalized as LtCol Hebert assumed command in the summer. The wing rescinded its 2,500-foot minimum for VR efforts and the TA-4F aircrews were allowed to use whatever altitude they deemed prudently necessary to accomplish their missions. Contrary to some earlier notions holding that flying at very low altitude was foolhardy, the TAC(A)s demonstrated its prudence. Aircrews who knew the area and were able to correctly navigate at 500 feet and below, were rarely fired on because they were in and out of a gunner's envelope almost before he could react. These low altitude tactics were effective, safely manageable, and produced results. For example, on 7 July 1969, operating at very low altitudes, Playboy spotted/adjusted for a flight of A-6As flying radar offset-aim-point delivery tactics in overcast (500-foot ceiling) conditions. This resulted in destruction of an enemy truck convoy moving under concealment of the low cloud cover, a fact clearly demonstrated by the 35mm photos taken by the Playboys. This tac-

1969
of
1970?

tic became commonplace as the heavily loaded A-6s orbited above the clouds while the Playboys would penetrate through a hole in the cover and, using knowledge of the local terrain to navigate at 200-500 feet, locate and pinpoint targets for destruction.

Another innovation was the program of TA-4F orientation flights given to 7th Fleet carrier pilots. Since a large number of Navy sorties were flown daily into Playboy operating areas, this orientation program paid off handsomely with an increased dedication to accuracy when Navy pilots, A-4 and A-7 alike, returned to their carriers and flew on road-cratering or what they once called "tree-busting" missions. Ironically, these orientation flights had the dual effect of helping Playboy man its aircraft through a critical pilot shortage period when some Playboys were flying three missions a day, for a total flight time of eight or nine hours, several days in a row. This was hard on efficiency, and harder still to justify from an aircrew safety standpoint. Several Playboy aircrewmembers chalked up 100-flight-hour months in July and August of 1969.

This shortage of aircrewmembers and the growing professional reputation of TA-4F crews resulted in Playboy volunteers from A-4, F-4, and A-6 communities in MAG-12 and MAG-13. Some naval flight officers (NFOs) had been used in the various growth stages of the program, but it now became possible for them to be designated as TAC(A)s. Egos and traditional loyalties were set aside. The mission now became more important than who was piloting the aircraft. Everyone recognized that the important thing was efficient VR and effective strike control, and this required two people working at peak efficiency. This emphasis on teamwork and the challenging nature of the mission were an irresistible draw to many.

The missions were organized around a two-cycle sortie, with one tanker refueling in the middle. This produced an average sortie length of two and one half hours. Time available for strike control and reconnaissance normally ran about 45-50 minutes per cycle. The bulk of the missions were VR, with an average of less than one strike per mission. However, the intelligence information developed and passed along to the airborne command post (Hillsboro) was absolutely essential in target package development for the following days and nights. If fleeting, lucrative targets were found and positively identified, ordnance flights would be diverted by Hillsboro to the target area. Further, when a strike fighter was shot down anywhere in the area, the fast FAC with the most fuel would take charge of the RESCAP until the arrival of an A-1 Hobo or Sandy aircraft. Slow



Viet Cong "victory garden" (top) and a floating supply dump of fuel oil became lucrative targets.

FACs, such as Nail or Raven, would often participate as well by operating at a higher altitude to observe and act as a radio relay while strike aircraft provided ordnance delivery as required. This rescue operation evolution was performed for Playboys' Capt James Buffington and Maj Robert Miecznikowski who were shot down in July 1969. These officers, the first Playboys to be shot down, were successfully rescued by a Jolly Green from Thailand after nearly six hours on the ground. Two more Playboy crews would be rescued by Jolly Greens during the next year.

*In his backstories
were NFOs, not
100% from ground
units - check w/
Mike R. on this.*



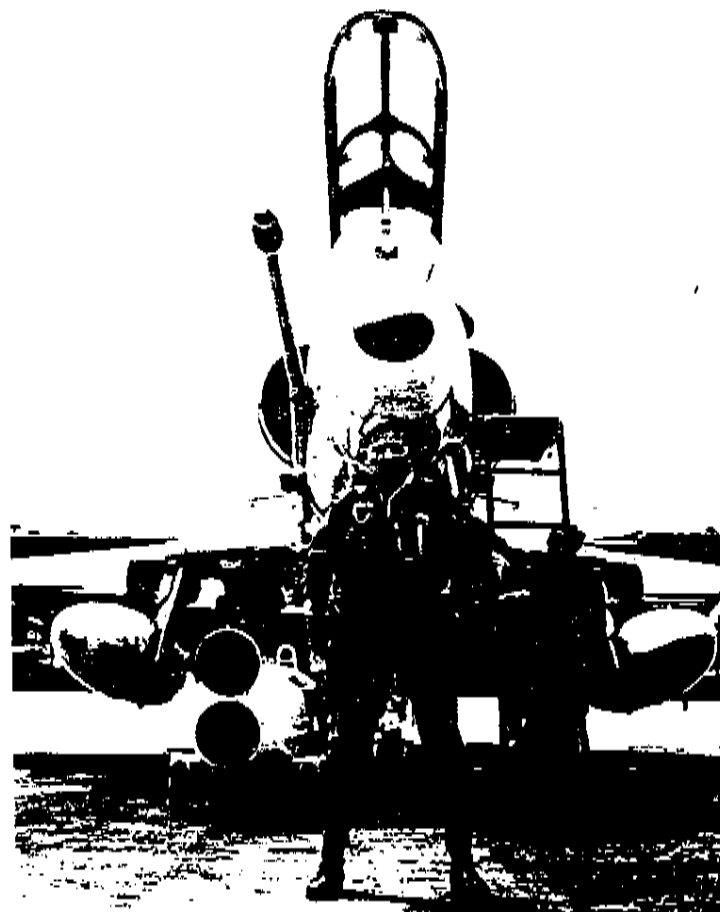
Oxygen mask and helmet saved the pilot when his plane took a direct hit on its windscreen.

Playboy tactics were based on an original H&MS-11 SOP developed by Maj John Clark in early 1968 and refined by the Misty experience. They included tracking the route at an offset bank and crossing over the route at irregular intervals. Reversals across the road were made level, or slightly nose-low, to retain airspeed and energy. The upward portions of this three-dimensional profile were accomplished while parallel to the route. The rear-seater would observe the road by fixing his sight on portions of the route or objects along it, then move to other points, as opposed to sweeping the terrain. The front-seater was occupied primarily in maintaining the flight path and avoiding terrain or weather ahead. Since the routes were seldom straight, it was necessary to reconnoiter the route structure in segments to avoid the dangerous loss of airspeed. Although these maneuvers were dictated primarily by enemy threat, the need for continually turning and banking was also necessary to expand the field of vision for the rear-seater at low altitudes. And, since the environment was characterized by nonradar, visually acquired, manually tracked anti-aircraft weapons fire, moving at 400 knots while maneuvering in 3 dimensions almost completely

negated visual tracking solutions by enemy gunners. This low altitude energy maneuvering technique was made easier in August 1969, as J-52 P-8 engines with an additional 700 pounds of thrust were installed in all the TA-4Fs.

Requirements for designation as a TAC(A) involved a solid grasp of tactics and a demonstrated expertise in strike control. Normally, 10 strikes were controlled under supervision of a designated TAC(A) as a precondition for qualification by the 1st MAW. Though it may have seemed that the TAC(A) designation was too jealously guarded, it was this adherence to high standards that was the lifeblood of an effective program. It took some crewmen as many as 30 Playboy missions to accrue 10 strike control evolutions.

During September 1969, Playboy developed a night deep air support (DAS) tactical package in response to an enemy situation. Through detailed analysis, the RAID section positively established that enemy gunfire was most intense at sunset in areas where active nightly road repair and heavy supply movement were going to occur. This was because enemy gunners could take advantage of the twilight to silhouette the VR aircraft against the sky while the ground was already darkened,



LtCol Dick Hebert commanded H&MS-11.



Maj Larry Robinson, flying an F-4B, was killed in action while escorting a Playboy JA-4F on a daylight hammer tactic.

thus complicating exact identification of the source of gunfire. Also, enemy road repair crews could work almost unobserved in the twilight and supply trucks could be on the move before the arrival of the nightly swarm of aircraft specifically configured for night detections and attack.

To counter this enemy tactic, the "hammer" package was developed. This involved sending the TA-4Fs to an area where such activity was predicted during the twilight period. The Playboy would come through the target area at maximum speed, minimum altitude, using his knowledge of the terrain to achieve surprise. When gunfire erupted, he would drop a series of flares, execute a high "G" pullup to a "perch" from which he could locate the target and, almost simultaneously, commence a dive to mark the target with a smoke rocket. A flight of two F-4B strike aircraft escorting the TA-4F at a higher, undetected altitude would then roll-in on the flare-marked target with gunkilling ordnance. The fourth member of this hammer flight was a photo aircraft (RF-4B) that would make a high-speed photographic pass within a minute after the ordnance exploded. The result of this photography was often startling in terms of the confirmed bomb damage assessment (BDA). This package tactic was significant because it exercised the full capability of the composite MAG at Da Nang and, most importantly to the FACs, reduced the number of guns and gunners in the operating area. The hammer tactic remained in the inventory and was used during different periods as need dictated.

The dry season in central Laos lasts from October to April. In 1969-70, this resulted in massive enemy efforts to move supplies over dry Laotian roads and brought U.S. aircraft swarming. Playboy flew nearly 700 combat missions during October, November, and December, including control of some 350 strikes and participation in 25

rescue operations. Some Playboy aircraft sustained hits, yet all but one returned safely to base. On 27 December, Maj Richard Lewis and 1stLt Paul Phillips were forced to eject in central Laos, just south of Sepone. They were recovered 23 hours later after an intensive antiaircraft artillery suppression effort enabled Air Force Jolly Greens to make a successful pickup.

On 5 January 1970, Maj Larry Robinson was killed in action while escorting a Playboy TA-4F on a modified (daylight) hammer tactic. "Robbie" was flying an F-4B and was rolling in on an active gun position that had been marked by Lt Bud Garske. He took barrage fire from multiple 37mm antiaircraft guns in the area, sustaining a direct hit in the cockpit area. He never attempted ejection. Both he and his back-seater went in with the aircraft. In nearly one year of sustained operations in Laos, which included hundreds of fire incidents, the loss of Larry Robinson (Playboy 70) was the first. . . and he wasn't flying the TA-4F.

Operation GRAND CANYON, a H&MS-11 Playboy-developed interdiction operation for 1st MAW exploitation, began on 2 February 1970. The initial concept was developed by the RAID section based on information drawn from multiple intelligence sources. After accepted as a tactically sound plan, 1st MAW conducted planning and coordination with 7th Air Force, III MAF, and XXIV Corps while targeting strike aircraft from MAGs 11, 12, and 13 for the operation area. This operation was aimed at slowing enemy infiltration along established motorable routes into the area west of Hue along the Laotian border. It entailed a 24-hour effort to interdict crucial chokepoints along the routes into I Corps. In addition to the normal high explosive/cratering ordnance, delayed ordnance was employed to complicate the task of enemy road repair crews. Playboy TAC(A)s provided dawn-to-dusk strike

control of 1st MAW A-4, F-4, and A-6 aircraft, totaling 150 sorties. The operation was an unqualified success. Chokepoints were completely closed and heavy BDA was obtained by B-52 strikes behind these interdiction points.

In early March 1970, while on a VR/TAC(A) mission, LtCol George Ward was killed by a single enemy bullet that entered the front cockpit. The aircraft was returned to home base by 1stLt Duncan Higgins, a pilot in the rear seat. LtCol Ward was scheduled to relieve Dick Hebert as H&MS-11 commanding officer. He and Larry Robinson were the only Playboys killed in action, although two others were wounded on missions. Maj Dorsie Page was forced to land his TA-4F with bullet wounds in both legs and an NFO in the rear seat. Capt Donald Swaby had a 19.2mm round hit his windscreen and the resulting shrapnel severed his oxygen hose, shattered his visor, and sent plexiglass into his eyes. Several fragments penetrated his mask and shattered his microphone, but he was able to clear his eyes, spit out the fragments, and safely return to Da Nang.

In April, Dick Hebert was relieved as commanding officer of H&MS-11 by LtCol Speed Shea. During his tenure as commanding officer, Dick Hebert had seen the unit grow into a highly effective operational unit. His enthusiasm and intrinsic leadership qualities engendered great personal loyalty from his men. He would always be known to them as "Playboy One."

Speed Shea saw Playboy operations shift increasingly to South Vietnam because of the phasing out of assets and the need for more air support for the remaining ground commanders in the South. The Playboy effort transitioned to a more

traditional Marine Corps role in direct support of the ground forces engaged in I Corps. This period also saw the loss of the third (and last) aircraft as Capt R.T. Rasmussen and Lt Chip Mills ejected from their TA-4F in the A Shau Valley in the summer of 1970. They were picked up in a heroic rescue action by a Jolly Green helicopter crew that sustained some 15 hits. Their six-hour effort was punctuated by a running gun battle between the enemy, the Sandy A-1 RESCAP aircraft, and the Jolly Green door gunners. The frequency of out-country missions waned rapidly as September approached because Playboys used their skills in the increasingly hostile skies of South Vietnam as the withdrawal of our forces increased. The end came on 14 September 1970, when the Playboy mission was canceled. The crews experienced the bittersweet emotions of pride in going home after a job well done while retaining the ache of a job they were not allowed to finish.

"Who were those guys?"

They were fighter pilots, scooter drivers, GIBs, RIOs, RSOs, and even Hummer drivers.† They were Marines doing their jobs as best they could. Little has been said or written of them, but many of these dedicated aircrewmen who passed through the Playboy rolls went on to become squadron commanders and more. Others returned to pursue civilian careers immediately after their tours in Vietnam. Regardless of what they went on to do, all counted their experiences on the trail in Laos as second to none. USMC

† Scooters are A-4s; GIBs, guys in back; RIOs, radar intercept officers; RSOs, reconnaissance surveillance officers who flew in RF-4Bs; Hummers, C-117s.

Quote to Ponder:

Flying High

"When I grow up I want to be a pilot because it's a fun job and easy to do. That's why there are so many pilots flying around. Pilots don't need much school. They just have to read numbers so they can read their instruments. I guess they should be able to read road maps too so they can find their way if they get lost. Pilots should be brave so they won't get scared if it's foggy and they can't see or if a wing or a motor falls off they should stay calm so they will know what to do. Pilots have to have good eyes to see through clouds and they can't be afraid of thunder and lightning because they are so much closer to them than we are. The salary pilots make is another thing I like. They make more money than they know what to do with. This is because most people think that flying is dangerous, except pilots don't because they know how easy it is. I hope I don't get air sick because I get car sick and if I get air sick I couldn't be a pilot and then I would have to go to work."

**—Anonymous Fifth Grade student
Beaufort, S.C.**