Art by John Paul Jones

FORWARD AIR CONTROL IN THE KOREAN WAR

by Major Tim Cline

The Korean War was the first "hot" combat challenge that the U.S. Air Force faced as an independent service. The Air Force intended to do well. In 1947 disengagement of the Army and Air Force was made easier by the Air Force's achievement of virtual autonomy during World War II. There were, however, some critical areas where the untangling was still unresolved as late as 1950. Few disagreements were voiced about roles in strategic or defensive situations. However, the question of Close Air Support—that arena where interservice cooperation was most critical—remained unsettled as a new war loomed in Asia.

At the outset of operations in Korea, little had been done to resolve Army-Air Force frictions regarding close support. The tactical control system laid down in a 1946 manual[1] was the best point of common agreement. Where both services had debated a viable tactical doctrine between the wars, the crucible of war in Korea made practical, hard decisions imperative. In the absence of such tactical doctrine both services reverted to the tactics of WW II.

Although the World War II organizational pattern of tactical operations was adopted *in toto* by the Far East Air Forces, some flaws were quickly exposed which had not been contemplated. While the job of Forward Air Controller (FAC) had been proven on the plains of Europe using tanks or jeeps as forward observation posts, it was quite another thing to employ ground FACs in the rugged mountain ranges of Korea. Locating enemy units, keeping them in sight, and controlling air strikes or artillery against them proved difficult. Tactical air controllers were easy victims of roadblocks and ambushes in the first days of Korean defensive operations and an immediate solution was required to make the tactical control system work. Almost accidentally the airborne FAC provided the answer.

Another problem appeared as an offshoot of force modernization. While much of U.S. Air Force ground control equipment was basically World War II vintage[2] there had been remarkable advances in the development of aircraft which were initially employed in air-to-ground warfare. Piston-powered engines had given way to turbines in the seven years which preceded the Korean War. By 1950, Fifth Air Force in Japan was almost completely equipped with modern jet fighters. The workhorse of 1950 was the F-80, Lockheed's "Shooting Star." When the war started, a difficulty plagued the F-80's launched out of Japan for Korean operations. While the jets were fast in getting to the target areas, their high rates of fuel consumption meant they could not wait long before delivering bombs. The surface-bound tactical air controller simply could not move from place to place, and become operational quickly enough to remain responsive to the fluid

(Above) "Mosquito" patch designed by Lt. Jim Brockmyer. USAF

(Left) Appropriate title: "Somewhere in Korea" for this unidentified photo. USAF

combat environment. The jets, with 10-15 minutes of loiter time, were consequently often told to drop on less critical targets or to go home. No one was satisfied with that state of affairs. LtC. Stanley P. Latiolais in Fifth Air Force Operations offered the suggestion that a T-6 be sent to the Eighth Army Air Liaison Officer, LtC. John McGinn, for use as an airborne Forward Air Control platform. Two other officers saw the value of airborne control and planted the seed of an effective tactical control system. LtC. J.R. Murphy and Maj. E.J. Lynch decided to form an "operations section" as an offshoot of the Joint Operations Center at Eighth Army Headquarters in Taejon, Korea. They asked for an operations officer and five pilots and solicited the support of AF Maj. Gen. Earl E. Partridge, a wholehearted backer of the idea from the beginning.[3]

As so often happens in combat the organization was formed before the first equipment arrived. 1Lt. Harold E. Morris welcomed the less than lusty roars of three L-5G's (the lightweight Stinson Sentinel) on July 9, 1950. These were flown into Taejon by Lts. Bryant and Mitchell and FNU Polk. Since T-6's were not yet available the four tried to leap off in their light aircraft to get the job done. Unfortunately the L-5G's ground-aborted with bad generators and the situation looked bleak. Not only had the lieutenants been denied information on the location of front lines (not many people knew the answer to that one in July 1950), they had no maps of proper scale nor operational procedures to follow.

Lts. Bryant and Mitchell were unperturbed. They soon scrounged rides in two of the 24th Infantry Division's L-17's. On the first day each received about 10 flights of F-80's and demonstrated the success of the airborne FAC idea. Mitchell destroyed an undetermined number of tanks and vehicles in the Chonui-Chochiwon area, Bryant destroyed three camouflaged tanks, damaged two vehicles and set fire to the town of Umsan. Although the fighter pilots had not been briefed to expect Forward Air Controllers, they adapted easily and the day's results prompted Col. Murphy to call it, "... the best day in Fifth Air Force history."[4] More excitement was on the horizon.

The next day the first T-6 arrived and worked a flight of "Aussie" F-51's with some success although the radio failed in the middle of the strike. Later in the day Lts. Bryant and Mitchell spotted 42 tanks moving bumper to bumper down the Chonui-Chochiwon road. F-80's were directed against these tanks and destroyed 17 with rockets and guns. The inherent flexibility of airpower was finally being proven over the battlefield.

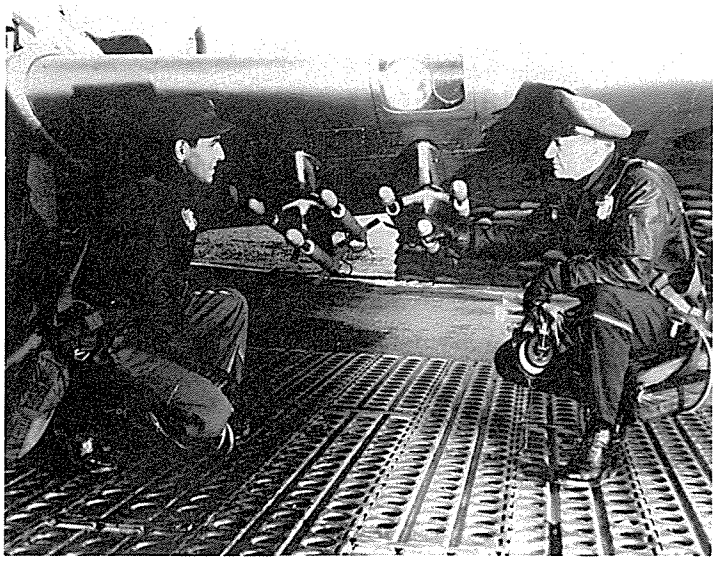
On its first outing, the T-6 won the hearts of all the pilots who relegated the L-5's to "senior control" and "radio relay" positions for long flights behind enemy lines. The lighter aircraft were just too vulnerable. On his first day as a FAC, Lt. Bryant, in an L-17, had been "bounced" by a YAK-3 just south of Umsan and his terrifying testimony about a narrow escape colored the growing loss statistics which were explicit both for ROK L-5's and U.S. Army L-4's and L-5's. The T-6 offered at least some hope for survival in a very nasty air environment. From the beginning it was the FAC's choice as the more durable aerial platform.[5]

The T-6, of course, was not specially designed for the requirements of close air support. The Air Force had placed an initial order for the "Texan" T-6 trainer with North American in 1939 and during World War II the sturdy single-engine aircraft was produced in great numbers. Cadets of 33 allied nations and the U.S. got their advanced training in the redoubtable bird. T-6D's, F's, and G's saw action in Korean skies.

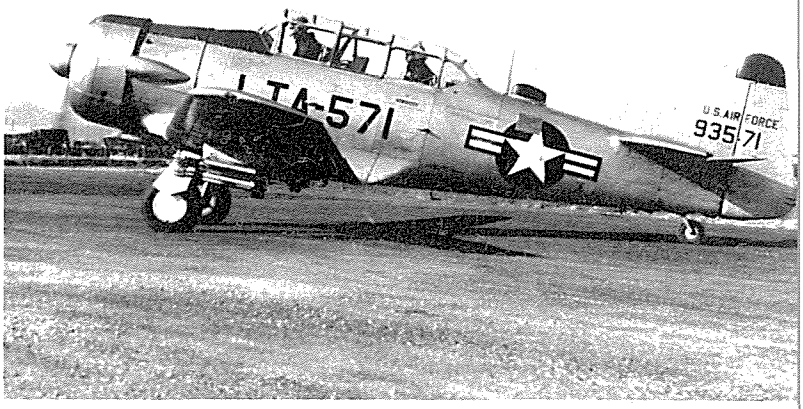
The T-6G had a 600-HP radial engine which gave a cruise speed of about 140 MPH. The wingspan was 42 feet and length about 29 feet. With a gross weight of 5,500 pounds the aircraft was a "lightweight" by today's standards. Yet compared to L-4's, L-5's, and L-17's, it was a full-scale jump ahead in weight, important for absorbing the concentrated small arms fire with which most FACs were greeted by their communist adversaries.[6] If it had a flaw it was the low wing which obstructed the pilot's downward visibility (the observer sat just behind the trailing edge and had a better downward view). Otherwise it was a superb two-seated aerial platform.

On July 11, 1950 the tiny nucleus of flyers got a commander and a base. Two days later, the squadron commander, Maj. Merrill H. Carlton, took his embryo organization on a long, rough jeep ride to K-2 airfield at Taegu. A single truck carted all their worldly supplies and equipment. They attached themselves to the 51st Provisional Fighter Squadron where a beggarly existence was begun for the still undesignated unit. Scrounging and hand-me-downs from the 51st kept the T-6's airborne, as mechanics applied every trick of the trade to keep the old aircraft flying. Puptents, dust and bathing in helmets were features of life at Taegu. Food was available, but not fresh, and toilet tissue was at a premium.

Aircraft parts and tools were not available until a C-47 sheared a gear on takeoff and was stripped of radios, tools, and pieces of plumbing which might work on a T-6. When a T-6 belly-landed in the Nakton River a flurry of cannibalization followed. Despite the primitive living, difficult working conditions, and lack of an official designation, the intrepid little band had high morale and a great record of achievement in the first month of operations. In July 1950, 269 missions were flown. Fifteen to 29 missions per day were generated and only two aircraft were lost, both from fuel exhaustion and both piloted by the same individual. He para-



Closeup of 2.5" rocket mounts with Lt. Tony Farrar (left) and unidentified officer. USAF



Taxiing out at K-47 Chun Chon for mission. Note 6148th TCS used red tip on rudder. USAF

chuted from his first mistake and walked away from a belly-landing on the second. Fortunately no one was killed by ground-fire in those first hectic days of operation. The concept of the airborne FAC managed to get into concrete and grew in scope and value as the war progressed.

On the 15th of July the "no-name" outfit was given a series of call signs by which the FACs would be known throughout the Korean War. A frag order designated missions from "Mosquito Able" through "Mosquito How" and the name stuck. One pilot credited the Reds with originating the nickname "Mosquitoes." According to him prisoners had complained during interrogation that behind each inquisitive T-6 came a line of stinging fighter-bombers. They dubbed the irritating little airplane "the Mosquito."[8] No matter who originated the unit's call sign, it was appropriate and widely respected. A handsome cloth patch designed by Lt. Jim Brockmyer, an attached ground force observer on loan from the 25th Infantry Division, soon appeared. It featured a truculent insect directing a flight of three F-80's and the single word: "Mosquito."

The "Mosquitoes" first tried to become part of the 6132nd Tactical Air Control Group when that unit arrived from the States late in July, but the group commander argued that his organization "had no place" for aircraft. So on August 1 after three weeks without a designation, Fifth Air Force finally published orders activating the FAC unit as the 6147th Tactical Control Squadron (Airborne) to be based at Taegu. The 6147th numerical designation embraced all aspects of airborne FAC operations in Korea for the duration of the war.[9] It was a good beginning for Maj. Carlton and his fledgling force.

The Mosquito pilot was primarily a daytime air controller. Although some night missions were launched to harass the enemy, best results usually came with daybreak. Not only was the airborne FAC a critical ingredient in marking targets for destruction, he also became a vital source of intelligence in the course of his missions. The T-6 pilot and his observer (usually an Army officer familiar with his division's ground situation) literally became the "eyes" for Eighth Army's Joint Operations Center and for division commanders on the front line. This special intelligence function won admiration and support from commanders at all levels in the early days of the Korean conflict.

When the ground situation steadily deteriorated and U.S. and ROK forces pulled back into the Pusan perimeter, there were very few praiseworthy combat developments. The airborne FAC was a clear exception. That hardy band of aviators, flying an aging trainer in what was universally described as "the most dangerous of any aviation activity in Korea,"[10] won high marks from distinguished visitors to K-2. General Partridge took a turn as a Mosquito pilot; Lt. Gen. Walton H. Walker praised the squadron on a visit to K-2; and Lt. Gen. James H. Doolittle put his stamp of approval on the FAC operation.[11]

By the first of September the squadron could count 27 T-6 aircraft in its stable. Of the 55 pilots on the roster at the end of August 1950 (with less than three weeks of flying), 17 had already completed a normal tour in T-6's by logging 50 combat missions. Unfortunately two crews were lost in August. Lt. Ernest Reeves and MSgt. Herschel I. Bushman were listed as MIA after failing to return from a mission on August 20 in the Uiryong area. Lt. Robert McCormick and Lt. Charles P. Wenzl were observed to crash into Sobuk San. Their bodies were later recovered. These first fatalities put a grim light on things. For the Mosquitoes it meant a no-holds-barred, all-out war. By the end of the second month the airborne FACs counted 183 tanks, 119 trucks, and 778 other vehicles (not including 15 ox-carts) damaged or destroyed.[12] The enemy was learning what aerial retribution was all about.

The gritty business of the FAC was soon the subject of a song composed by Lt. Brockmyer which summed up the squadron's feelings about their kind of mission (to the tune of "Galway Bay"):

"Oh they say the T-6 wasn't made for combat
And I am here to tell you that is so
But I'll fly another mission in the morning
Although I'm not convinced that I ought to go.

All ye pilots gather 'round to hear my story
Do not talk of jets and Baker 29's
For this evening we'll observe one minute's silence
In memory of 'Mosquitoes' on the line"[13]

Since the job was so dangerous a firm decision was made to allow pilots who completed 50 missions to rotate to Japan for non-combat duty or back to tactical fighter or bomber units of their choice. This kind of policy boosted morale and gave the pilots something to shoot for. First to rotate out were Lt. Bryant with 56 and Lt. Mitchell with 55 missions. Quite a few officers elected to serve a second tour of 50 missions.

Until September 16, 1950, when UN forces took the offensive in Korea, the 6147th operated chiefly in close support of friendly forces in defensive positions. The enemy advance was slowed as T-6's located enemy movements and concentrations and directed airpower against these targets. Ground commanders were effusive in their praise for the unarmed airmen. Maj. Gen. William R. Kean, commanding the 25th Infantry Division, stated: "The close air support rendered by Fifth Air Force again saved this division as they have many times before."[14] In October, Gen. Kean sin-

gled out the 6147th with special praise for its part in the air campaign.

In late September 1950, with the Reds fully on the run, the primary mission of the Mosquitoes changed profoundly. The FACs pursued large groups of retreating troops directing air strikes well ahead of the advancing UN lines. They scattered over 300,000 "safe conduct" leaflets ahead of retreating communist forces. Finally, the T-6's operated as the "eyes" of advancing elements of U.S. ground forces. Indeed, no mission seemed beyond the scope of the forward air controllers. Deep penetrations, search and rescue, night direction for B-26's, drop mission coordination and artillery adjustment all fell at one time or other within the purview of Maj. Carlton's air controllers.

As the North Koreans were chased north the choicest targets began to get out of range of FACs at K-2, Taegu. Four of the T-6's were fitted with 56-gallon belly tanks but trips to the target areas still took over an hour en route. The precious flexibility of the airborne FAC was getting stretched to the maximum. On October 4, 1950 the squadron moved north to K-14, Kimpo Air Base. This overcrowded air patch got the Mosquitoes closer but not quite close enough. Another move put the unit into K-16, Seoul Municipal Airport, across the Han River. K-16 proved a vast improvement of short duration. The FACs reached their targets in minutes again. Although they lived in tents and suffered quite a lot of sniping on evening final approaches, the location near the "big city" was a big boost to morale.

All good deals seem short in duration, however, and before long the utility of the stay at Seoul ended. The front lines had continued to move so rapidly that in late October the T-6's found themselves obliged to move again. The squadron now flew into North Korean territory and landed at K-24, Pyongyang East Airfield. They were greeted by a chilling blast of frigid Siberian air mass. Teeth chattered as airmen set up tents.

Although the 6147th spent October on the move, missions of visual reconnaissance and fighter direction were not neglected. In the meantime Maj. Carlton received a promotion to lieutenant colonel and quite a few Flying Crosses and Air Medals were awarded to his men.[15]

In October the 6147th discovered a new and accurate type of target marking device for the airborne FAC's. The use of smoke grenades and flares, low-flying passes over the target area, wing-waggling, formation flying with the fighters, pointing in a turn at a target and radio verbal descriptions had brought successes to Mosquito operations. Unfortunately, some of these techniques were too time-consuming, often excessively dangerous and made the task of shifting quickly from target to target all but impossible.

Col. Carlton suggested that a small smoke rocket mounted on rails beneath the wing of a T-6 might be an effective target marking device. In October he proved the concept by acquiring 76 smoke rockets (2.36 in.). He established an in-country combat test program, using a small island in the Han River as a firing range. The first target marked in this novel way was a North Korean Army self-propelled gun which was hit by the third rocket fired by Lt. Bruce Iverson. No fighters were used on that target since Lt. Iverson scored a direct hit which put the gun out of commission. Rockets gave the FAC improved accuracy and safety in target marking. A pilot could now fire from over a thousand feet away and pull out clear of the most intense ground fire.

The widely traveled FACs composed another tune to memorialize their aerial treks to the far-flung front lines in September and October (to the tune of "Sweetheart of Sigma Chi"):

"From around Pusan
To old Pyongyang
We have flown the damn T-6
Flying low and slow over ice and snow
Our ground air support always clicks
Guiding elsewhere flight and Tammerlane
And Gas Mask Willie too
We have led them all, targets big and small
We're the T-6 'Mosquito' crew."[16]

Unfortunately the stay at "old Pyongyang" was prematurely terminated by massive Chinese intervention at the close of October. The squadron fell back to K-16, Seoul Municipal, and returned to the familiar business of providing close air support to retreating UN forces. Despite the discomfort and hardship of extreme winter cold the sortie rate stayed high.

By December the squadron was working with flights of the newly introduced F-84 "Thunderjet" and even a single flight of F-86 "Sabre-Jets." The F-84 became the workhorse for close air support in the last years of the war.

On December 14, 1950 the squadron put an unprecedented 25 "Mosquitoes" into the air at the same time.[17] The demand for FACs was insatiable. They were omnipresent during daylight hours. One pilot boasted: "Ask any fighting GI what Air Force plane he remembers best. Ten to one he'll say the T-6 Mosquito."[18]

The Air University, where air doctrine and tactics were being studied, sent Col. Knight of the Barcus Board to evaluate the Mosquito operation. His assessment was made easy by the profuse testimony of both airmen and soldiers. Impressed by the mass of remarkable combat statistics which the 6147th had accumulated, he stated a firm belief that operations with airborne FACs in close air support were a "must" for tactical airpower in the context of a future war.[19] These words proved a haunting refrain in 1966 when the USAF had to "reinvent" the airborne FAC for use in Viet Nam.

The Chinese were quick to appreciate the key role which the forward air controllers were performing. Ingenious countermeasures were designed to thwart the Mosquitoes. In daylight hours Chinese troops dispersed into small groups of 8 to 10 men. They carefully spread troop supplies about the countryside. In the art of camouflage the enemy excelled. Outer garments for many soldiers were reversible—white on one side for traveling in snow, and brown on the other to match the mud. Troops on the march covered themselves with straw and stood motionless in open fields until the FAC had passed beyond the ridge lines. Tanks and vehicles were driven through the walls of houses or huts for protection from probing FACs (exactly as another enemy did at Dong Ha, Trabek and An Loc in 1972). When camouflage failed to safeguard their forces more aggressive means were used. If a Mosquito surprised an enemy force by popping over a ridgeline at 50 feet "on the deck" he might meet a skyful of groundfire or flak.

From the beginning FACs faced highly accurate 20mm groundfire. As the importance of the FAC to the successful application of air power was appreciated by the enemy the Mosquito became his favorite target. In August 1950 the North Koreans had first fired flak at the little aircraft. "There was hardly a day," the Squadron reported, "when one of the Mosquitoes did not return with a hole in its wing or fuselage or bullet lodged somewhere near the front or rear cockpits."[20] In less than a year and a half (October 1951) the Fifth Air Force was flying flak-suppression missions to insure the survival of the Mosquitoes. In December 1951 serious consideration was given to using the F-51 as a "Fast FAC" aircraft.[21]

Hostile ground fire squeezed the safe altitudes for FAC operations into a narrow band between 1,200 feet (the effective altitude for small arms fire) and 3,000 feet (where 20mm and 40mm anti-aircraft guns were most effective and at which height too little detail could be observed on the ground). Still the pilots pressed to get lower where the enemy could be flushed out if necessary. One Mosquito followed a set of tank tracks at altitudes as low as 10 feet, and discovered five tanks dug into a mountainside. This mobile artillery battery was completely destroyed by fighters.[22] The loss rate for T-6's did not improve, however. Some pilots issued a call for heavier prop jobs for the hazardous work. One group suggested the A-24 (the Navy's SB2D) or the Corsair (F4U) as a possible replacement.[23] Others wanted the F-51. Col. Carlton had his own idea for a T-6 replacement. He described a new plane with a speed range between 140 and 300 mph, a high rate of climb, and a "comfortable, roomy and heated" cockpit for three crew members. He imagined a third seat for a full-time radio operator.[24] All the talk had merit yet little came of it.

Meanwhile, the T-6 kept right on going.

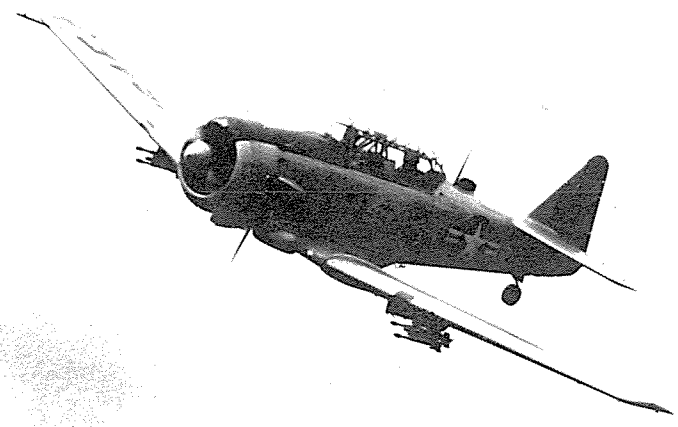
In January 1951 the Korean War began to settle down to heavy but irregular pushing and shoving near Seoul. The spectacular chase up and down the inhospitable peninsula neared an end. In the first period of six months, hastened by the desperate nature of fluid warfare, a hastily improvised airborne forward air control program had been developed. This program accounted for the effective and highly praised close air support received by UN field forces. Without a clear doctrine for guidance, a complete FAC program had been forged. Much of the credit is due to the personal enthusiasm of Gen. Partridge and to the press of the wartime situation. Tactical innovations were abundant. The Mosquito bridged the awkward gap between ground and air forces and won the plaudits of both services.

On January 22, 1951, the 6147th reached a particularly gratifying milestone. After 6½ months of combat flying, Lt. James R. Topping and SFC Fred C. Heider logged the unit's 20,000th combat hour. The squadron had amassed 7,174 effective sorties with an average sortie time of 2+45 hours. There had been 23 aircraft losses, or one per 870 hours. Col. Carlton was justifiably proud of his command.

Another innovation followed on the heels of this achievement when a C-47 dubbed "Mosquito Mellow" joined the squadron's

(Above) The ruggedness of much of Korea's combat area is revealed here with overflights of AT-6s. USAF

(Below) AT-6 with rocket racks. Since this a/c had been modified to experiment with 81 mm rockets, perhaps installation of the 2.5" was not complete. Gene Risedorph



operation. This "mother ship" became the forerunner of modern-day Air Force command and control aircraft and served as an airborne VHF radio relay ship and senior control platform designed to improve communications. "Mosquito Mellow's" senior controller reassigned Mosquitoes to different areas as the combat situation changed. The concept permitted positive contact for the Joint Operations Center (radio call sign, "Mellow") with all FACs airborne at or beyond the front lines. Finally, the varied ordnance carried by different flights of fighters could be matched to target by such an airborne command post. The "Gooney Bird" proved a valuable complement to the mission of the wide-ranging Mosquitoes.

With the stabilization of the front line the Mosquitoes shifted to seek out troop concentrations and supplies and to detect main supply routes. The whole Fifth Air Force began to shade the emphasis on close air support toward interdiction. Ground troops began to dig in for a very gradual forward movement. At last the squadron was recognized by the presentation of the Distinguished Unit Citation. Gen. Partridge read the citation himself. Edward R. Murrow, the famed newscaster, accorded the event international publicity a few days later:

> The 6147th Tactical Air Control Squadron in Korea has received a Presidential citation. That's the Mosquito outfit, and it is, I think, without parallel in the whole history of aerial warfare. . . . Those old T-6 Mosquitoes couldn't live against air opposition, and they are vulnerable to ground fire, even from light automatic weapons. They have taken their losses. . . . They are a gallant crew of aerial scouts, with uncanny ability to penetrate enemy camouflage. Their low-level flying and spotting have not been equalled since men began to use flying machines to make war.[25]

By March 1951 the Mosquito Squadron had published and adopted a firm set of tactics which were issued and taught to "new heads." Their tactics varied little from the FAC tactics employed years later in Viet Nam. In the normal situation a Mosquito orbited in a left-hand turn to rendezvous with an assigned flight of fighters in the vicinity of the target (Figure 1).

When the fighters visually acquired the FAC they were sent to a common frequency and given information about the target by the FAC. As the leader of the flight of fighters climbed toward Point A with the rest of the flight in extended trail, the FAC made a rocket firing pass on the target and pulled off to circle the target. The fighter leader began his roll in at Point B and received a clearance from the circling Mosquito. The process could be repeated as necessary.

On March 28, 1951 Col. Merrill H. Carlton's tour ended. Having commanded the 6147th since July 12, 1950, he was intimately associated with development of the airborne FAC concept. His personal contributions to this chapter of Air Force history are praiseworthy. The FACs of this world should accord him a place as "Father" of their profession. He was replaced by Lt. Col. Timothy F. O'Keefe.[26]

Almost immediately the squadron was expanded to group size and remained at that inflated level for the duration of the conflict. Continuing to contribute in a wide variety of missions, the squadron forged a set of tactics which linked the Army and Air Force in effective harmony.

Sadly, the pioneering efforts of this premier outfit were ignored in the years following the Korean War. Even during the war the airborne forward air controller had remained in a state of limbo. Without a Table of Organization and Equipment, the "Mosquito" group held no claim for a permanent foothold in USAF's postwar force structure. Having been haphazardly formed in the thick of combat with improvised fighter trainers to fly, and without a formal school or training system to sustain its craft, the airborne FAC group simply ground down and disappeared. Not a ripple disturbed the placid reservoir of an Air Force doctrine in a time of longing for strategic relevancy and the full-blown delights of the Jet Age. From 1946 until 1966 the stature of the FAC in doctrine and attitudes never changed. Only the shock of a new war revived interest in this neglected branch of the aviation business dedicated to air strike control in the low and slow flight regimes.

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

This is John Paul Jones' third appearance in the Journal. His bicentennial art as appears on the rear cover of the Summer Journal, 1976, together with illustration of helicopter rescue in the same issue did much to enhance Volume 21, Number 2. John Paul is a professional pilot as well as an artist. He makes his home in El Paso, Texas.

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Major Timothy E. Kline graduated from the Air Force Academy in 1964. Flew F-4C and F-4D aircraft for the 78TFS, RAF Woodbridge, UK 1966-1969.

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