

One-Man Show at Bong Son

Among the most courageous forward air controllers was a former fighter pilot called "Mac the FAC."

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

WHEN awards of the Air Force Cross in the Vietnam War are tabulated by mission area, the forward air controllers (FACs) rank third, exceeded only by tactical fighter pilots and helicopter rescue crews. The mission of the FACs was to find targets and mark them with smoke rockets for attention by fighters or ground fire. It was sweaty work, especially in the early years of the war when FACs flew light planes like the Cessna O-1 Bird Dog, designed for private pilots back home, not for war. The degree of danger was in direct proportion to the aggressiveness of the individual FAC. One of the most skillful and determined was a former fighter pilot, Maj. William McAllister.

In early 1964, Major McAllister was assigned to the 22d ARVN Division, flying out of Qui Nhon on the east coast of Vietnam. He rapidly earned a reputation for daring, accuracy, and sound tactical judgment. Some FACs would fire their rockets from an altitude of a few hundred feet. Not Major McAllister, known to the fighter pilots and ground troops with whom he worked as "Mac the FAC." He went in on his target at treetop level, and although the O-1 was not equipped with a sight, Major McAllister developed uncanny accuracy, often attacking a target with his four rockets before the fighters arrived. He was, in short, one of the best in the business. Since targets invariably shot back, his aggressive style drew an unusual number of hits on the O-1, which did nothing to dampen the combative spirit of Mac the FAC.

On the afternoon of March 25, 1965, Major McAllister flew the prelude to a mission that was to earn him the Air Force Cross. A detachment of Vietnamese Marines was pinned down in a narrow valley surrounded by 3,000-foot mountains near Bong Son, fifty miles north of Qui Nhon. In marginal weather with a ceiling lowering from 1,200 feet, Major McAllister, under frequent heavy fire from small arms and automatic weapons, directed a series of attacks by A-1Es against enemy forces, enabling the ARVN Marines to gain their objective. He then remained in the area, a target for Viet Cong gunners, while a helicopter from Qui Nhon evacuated two US Marine advisors who had been wounded. Low on fuel and with engine problems, Major McAllister limped back to base, ending another successful three-hour mission.

At 11:00 that evening, the ARVN Marines again called for help. Grabbing the first in-commission Bird Dog he could find, Major McAllister headed for Bong Son, flying under a low overcast that extended up to 8,500 feet. After finding the valley, which was barely wide enough for tight 360-degree turns, he called for flares. The assigned C-123 flareship could not enter the valley

under a 500-foot ceiling. Major McAllister told the C-123's pilot to climb above the overcast and drop flares from 10,000 feet, using a radar fix from Pleiku. When the first flares fell off-target, he steered the flareship into position for accurate release, using dead reckoning. The intense light of the flares created a double hazard for the FAC: His O-1 now was illuminated against the overcast, making it a clear target for enemy fire, while the light of the flares threatened to blind him and set up perfect conditions for vertigo.

When enemy fire became too hot, Mac the FAC climbed into the overcast and orbited in the narrow valley, using the meager instruments with which the Bird Dog was equipped. He then requested the Air Support Operations Center at Pleiku to send a succession of flareships that would illuminate the combat area until dawn. Under the light of the flares, the Marines were able to reorganize themselves and hold off the VC attackers. Major McAllister helped disrupt the attack by firing an M1 out the window of the Bird Dog after his rockets were expended.

Nearly three hours after takeoff and with his fuel gauges hovering on empty, Major McAllister flew out of the valley, his O-1 ventilated by bullet holes. Shortly after his departure, the VC broke off their attack, confused and disorganized by the defenses Mac the FAC had directed while contending with weather, terrain, and enemy fire for which the little Cessna was not designed.

Before Major McAllister could be awarded the Air Force Cross—only the ninth of the Vietnam War up to that time—he was killed in an accident on what would have been his last mission before returning to the States. He left behind a record of valor that was an inspiration for those who were to come in the long remaining years of that war. ■



Maj. William "Mac the FAC" McAllister's aggressive tactics saved many a fighter and ground mission in Vietnam.