



Bird Dog's Last Battle

Hilliard Wilbanks swept low over the advancing enemy, firing out the side window with his M-16 rifle.

By John T. Correll

Habersham County is nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in northeastern Georgia. The population today is only about 36,000. Forty years ago, it was even less, but despite that, seven of Habersham's sons lost their lives in the faraway war in Vietnam. One of them, Hilliard Almond Wilbanks, was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

Hilliard Wilbanks grew up in the small town of Cornelia, where he played the piano at his church and

was right guard on the football team. Opportunities in Cornelia were limited, so when he finished high school in 1950, Wilbanks enlisted in the Air Force. He then served almost four years as an air policeman in Strategic Air Command.

In 1954, Wilbanks qualified for the aviation cadets, and in 1955, he earned his commission and pilot wings. His first duty as an officer was as a T-33 instructor pilot at Greenville AFB, Miss. Subsequently, he was an F-86 Sabre pilot and an aircraft mainte-

nance officer in Alaska and Nevada. In 1966, he trained as a forward air controller at Hurlburt Field, Fla., and went to Vietnam, where he flew the O-1E Bird Dog.

By Feb. 24, 1967, Wilbanks had flown 487 combat missions. He had already received the Distinguished Flying Cross and 17 Air Medals. He was scheduled to finish his tour and leave Vietnam on March 18. He already had orders for Laughlin AFB, Tex., where he would have been an instructor pilot in the T-37 flight training program.



cally, enemy forces and targets were concealed by jungle cover and the situation on the ground was difficult to see from the air.

To help pilots put their ordnance on target and to lessen the risk of hitting allied forces and civilians, the rules of engagement required that all ground attack strikes in South Vietnam be directed by a forward air controller.

FACs flew low and slow in small spotter airplanes, conducting visual reconnaissance in the same area every day. They became familiar with the terrain and regular activity in their sector and thus would notice if any big changes took place. They knew the places where an enemy might hide. FACs were based with the Army units they supported, so the forces in action below were not strangers. Like Wilbanks, most FACs had previously flown fighters, so they also understood the problems and capabilities of the strike flights.

The first FAC aircraft in Vietnam was the lightweight Cessna O-1E Bird Dog. It could reach 150 mph in an emergency, but the normal cruising speed was 104 mph. The Air Force first obtained Bird Dogs from the Army, where they had been in service since 1950 with the designation L-19.

The O-1E had two seats, but FACs usually flew alone. The Bird Dog carried no ordnance except four 2.75-inch

white phosphorous smoke rockets, used to mark targets. Small-arms fire from the ground could easily penetrate the cockpit.

Later in the war, FAC aircraft would add armor and weapons, but in the early days the pilots were starkly vulnerable. Fortunately, the Viet Cong understood that the FACs directed the attack fighters. To avoid bringing down an air strike upon themselves, they seldom shot at the FACs unless an engagement was already in progress.

At this stage of the war, FACs had a divided command structure. They were assigned to a support squadron at an air base for administration, maintenance, and supply. However, they lived with the Army, and their mission orders came through a different chain. The FACs' operational boss was an air liaison officer, or ALO, attached to an Army headquarters.

Wilbanks was assigned to the 21st Tactical Air Support Squadron at Nha Trang, but, in actuality, he worked for the ALO for the Central Highlands, Lt. Col. Norman Mueller. Mueller—a FAC himself—was attached to the US Army advisory team working with the South Vietnamese 23rd Division, headquartered at Ban Me Thuot.

Mueller and his FACs were responsible for the southern half of II Corps, the largest of the four military regions in South Vietnam. Their area covered

He was eager to see his wife and four children, including twins who were born two weeks after he had left the United States for Vietnam. He had survived almost 11 months of dangerous duty, but his luck was about to run out.

No Guns, No Armor

The Air Force's forward air control system was disbanded after the Korean War and had to be rebuilt in 1962 for Southeast Asia. In Vietnam, there were no regular battle lines. Typi-



Photo courtesy of Wilbanks family

Far left: An Air Force Art Collection painting by Stewart Wavell-Smith, "FAC Tea Party," depicts Wilbanks' last mission. Left: Wilbanks in 1955 was a second lieutenant undergoing basic training at Laredo AFB, Tex.



Wilbanks in Vietnam, where he was only weeks away from the end of his tour when he took off on Feb. 24, 1967.

seven provinces, about 10,000 square miles. Normally, Mueller had about 30 FACs, but replacements had been slow in arriving and in February 1967, only 12 were assigned. They flew numerous missions every day. "There were no holidays," Mueller said.

For most of his time in Vietnam, Wilbanks had been the senior sector FAC at Bao Loc, a provincial capital on the southwestern flank of the Central Highlands, about 100 miles north of Saigon. As the end of his tour approached, though, an opening occurred at Da Lat. "I reassigned Captain Wilbanks there in recognition of his hard work," Mueller said.

Ambush at the Plantation

Da Lat, higher up in the mountains, was considerably cooler and less humid than the coastal plain. South Vietnam's military academy was there. The climate was ideal for growing vegetables for the Saigon market. At these higher elevations of the Central Highlands, plantations with chest-high tea bushes predominated. The cultivated areas were interspersed with jungle.

Yet the roads and the railway south were often disrupted and harassed by the Viet Cong. North Vietnamese Army units passed through the area regularly. The NVA infiltrated down the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos, cut through Cambodia, and crossed the

border into central South Vietnam. To intercept the infiltrators, US Special Forces manned outposts at 20-mile intervals and the 23rd Ranger Division of the South Vietnamese Army conducted regular sweeps in company strength or better.

On Feb. 22, 1967, an NVA battalion arrived in the area of Di Linh, about 15 miles from Wilbanks' former base at Bao Loc. There, the NVA regulars joined forces with the local Viet Cong. On Feb. 23, the communists captured

a large tea plantation. They forced the owners and workers to help them build an ambush site on the two hills overlooking the road that ran north from Saigon to Da Lat. Laboring through the night, they dug hundreds of foxholes and several machine gun emplacements among tea bushes, all carefully camouflaged.

The next morning, unaware of the ambush, the South Vietnamese army company stationed at Di Linh notified division headquarters at Ban Me Thuot that it was heading out for its regular sweep of the area. The company walked into the ambush at the tea plantation and was all but annihilated.

The officers and the NCOs were killed. The radio bearer, who had been cautioned to never let the enemy capture his radio, threw it down a well behind the plantation house. Thus, the ambush was not reported. The NVA dragged the dead out of sight, penned up the survivors with the other captives, and reset the ambush.

The day wore on and nothing was heard from the company. Around noon, two Ranger companies from Bao Loc set out to see what had happened. Capt. Daryl Westby, who had replaced Wilbanks as the sector FAC at Bao Loc, flew overhead reconnaissance. By late afternoon, Westby had flown three sorties but had not found either the missing ARVN company or the enemy unit.

Mueller, in his own O-1 Bird Dog, flew down from Ban Me Thuot to help. Army advisor Maj. Robert A. Snell



Wilbanks (flight suit) and two unidentified crew members show off their O-1 Bird Dog during a day in 1966.



On Feb. 22, 1967, an NVA battalion and Viet Cong near Di Linh forced locals to help them build an ambush site.

came along in the back seat. They met Westby at Bao Loc. Mueller said they would take over the FAC job for a while to give Westby a break to eat and rest. Mueller was having trouble with the radio in his airplane, so he left it at Bao Loc and took Westby's Bird Dog instead.

Mueller called Wilbanks, who was airborne near Da Lat, and asked him to come join the search. Wilbanks had flown hundreds of reconnaissance and combat missions in the area. "He knew the isolated communities, the trails, the streams, the formidable jungles, [the] Green Beret activities, the tea plantations, and the native travel and work patterns better than anyone," Mueller said.

At Di Linh, Mueller and Snell saw the Rangers from Bao Loc approaching the tea plantation. Everything looked normal. Two flights of F-4 Phantoms were orbiting overhead, awaiting a call to action, but they were very low on fuel and had to leave. The most logical place for the enemy to be was a wooded area to the southwest, and Mueller directed the F-4s to expend their ordnance there in a single pass. They did so and headed home to Cam Ranh Bay.

The Trap Is Sprung

Wilbanks arrived and checked in with Mueller, who was busy with the F-4

strike. As the 23rd Battalion Rangers approached the tea plantation, Wilbanks flew visual reconnaissance ahead of them. He was in constant touch by radio with Army Capt. R.J. Wooten, the senior American advisor.

Three helicopter gunships were in the area in case Wilbanks needed them. Two more flights of fighters were on the way.

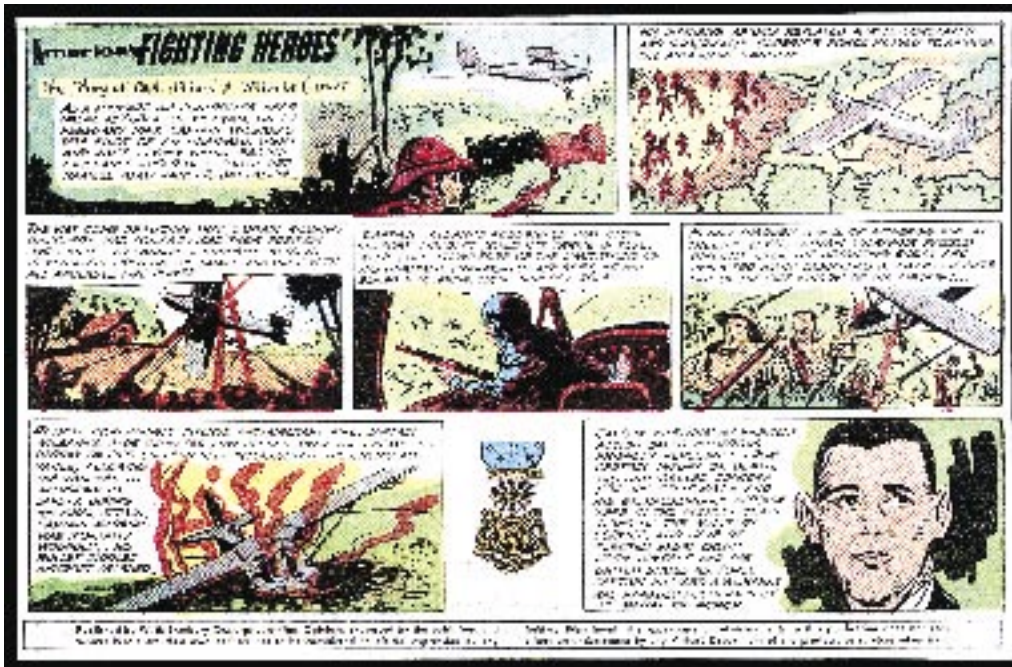
Wilbanks scanned the familiar slopes of the hills overlooking the road, looking for signs of change. He noticed lots of them, including the camouflaged emplacements among the tea bushes.

He had found the enemy force. He radioed a warning to Wooten that the Rangers were walking into an ambush. The NVA was either monitoring the FAC radio frequency or else sensed that



North Vietnamese troops set the ambush in the Central Highlands near Di Linh, on the road between Saigon and Da Lat.

Photo courtesy Wilbanks family



The tale of Wilbanks' last mission was told in this August 1968 issue of "Recon Record," published by American Armed Forces Features.

Wilbanks had seen them. Even though the Rangers were not yet fully in the crossfire, the NVA and Viet Cong opened up with everything they had. The trap was sprung.

Wilbanks quickly vectored the helicopter gunships onto the enemy positions. Wilbanks fired a smoke rocket to mark the target for the gunships as the whole hillside erupted with fire.

"My unit had been advancing eastward and the lead elements were working up a slope unaware of the prepared VC positions just ahead," Wooten said in his report of the action. "When the VC battalion learned their positions were discovered, they opened up on my forces and the two FAC planes above with 60 mm mortars, Czech 12.7 mm machine guns, .30-caliber machine guns, American BARs, and countless shoulder weapons. Two of my companies were pinned down and the forward elements suffered heavy casualties."

Two miles to the south, Mueller was flying low over the area bombed by the F-4s, looking for signs of the enemy force, and calling in a report to the Bao Loc sector command post. He was on the UHF radio frequency used by the fighters and did not hear the exchange between Wilbanks and the Rangers on the FM frequency.

Mueller did not know the enemy battalion had been flushed until a stream of .50-caliber tracers swept within a few feet of his airplane. Mueller put the Bird Dog into a vertical bank and pulled through several four-G turns before eluding the tracers. Then a second gun

on the other side of the road opened up. This time, the tracers tracked Mueller for more than a mile before he ducked low behind a clump of trees to get away from them.

Meanwhile, the helicopter gunships, directed by Wilbanks, attacked the enemy positions and momentarily suppressed the ground fire. However, one of the helicopters took a .50-caliber hit in its hydraulic system. The pilot reported he might not be able to make it back to base. Wilbanks released the other two helicopters to accompany the damaged one as escorts.

Wilbanks Presses the Attack

The NVA and Viet Cong, seeing

the gunships leave, boiled out of their foxholes and launched a fresh attack. They charged down the hill toward the exposed forward elements of the Ranger force.

The fighters would not arrive in time to help. Whatever was to be done from the air, Wilbanks would have to do himself. He took the Bird Dog down in a dive and fired a white phosphorous smoke rocket into the middle of the enemy ranks. That stopped the advance temporarily as the NVA turned their attention and fire toward the small airplane. Wilbanks attacked again, but his supply of rockets was soon gone.

The only weapon he had left was his M-16 rifle, which he carried for

Lt. Col. Norman Mueller was the air liaison officer for the Central Highlands, and Wilbanks' boss. On the day of the ambush, Mueller called in Wilbanks, who was airborne near Da Lat, and asked him to come join the search. Note, in this photo, the nine-foot-long, 20-pound python occupying Mueller's attention. He bought it for Army Special Forces men at Ban Me Thuot.





Several Air Force members gather under the sunscreen of a rudimentary maintenance shed that had been set up at the camp at Bao Loc.

self-defense in case his airplane was shot down and he had to defend himself on the ground. Three times Wilbanks swept low above the enemy force, firing his rifle on full automatic out the side window and changing clips between passes.

The M-16 was not in the same league as regular aircraft armament, but on full automatic, it spat out 700 rounds a minute and at the altitude Wilbanks was flying, the ground was well within lethal range. It was sufficient to slow down the NVA and Viet Cong and give the Rangers a chance to withdraw to a safer position.

Despite his evasive maneuvering, Wilbanks was an easy target for the enemy rifles and machine guns. "Each pass, we could hear his plane being hit," said Wooten.

Mueller, having shaken off the tracers, turned back toward the plantation and saw Wilbanks ahead, diving and jinking over the worst areas and firing on the enemy. "Twice I advised him to break it off and get some altitude, but got no response," Mueller said.

When the jinking movements stopped, Mueller knew that Wilbanks had been hit. "We joined on his left wingtip and could see his helmet slumped forward," Mueller said. "He was either unconscious or already dead. ... We flew in loose formation until he crashed."

"On the last pass, I estimate he was only 100 feet off the ground and directly over his objective," said Army Capt. Gary F. Vote, another American

advisor. "He began making what appeared to be erratic moves, going first up, then down, then banking to the west. He then flew over my position. At this time, I felt he was wounded and looking for a friendly landing site, so I jumped up and waved my arms. However, as his plane banked again to the south, I could see that he was unconscious. His aircraft crashed 100 meters from my position."

Mueller reported, "The plane flew into the tea bushes at a very shallow angle and flipped onto its back right between the opposing forces." Mueller noted the time as 6:04 p.m.



Wilbanks' O-1, shown here after the crash, was a total wreck. With its pilot mortally wounded and unable to exert control, the Bird Dog flew into tea bushes and flipped on its back.

Rescue Too Late

Wilbanks was still alive when Vote and two other Rangers got there. They cut away his harness and pulled him out of the bullet-riddled airplane. However, the Rangers and Wilbanks were pinned down beside the wreckage by intense fire from the hillsides.

Mueller summoned back the two helicopter gunships that had left on escort duty. They came sweeping in to attempt the rescue, but took heavy battle damage from the ground and had to pull out. Mueller put out an urgent call for "any Dust Off" (medevac helicopter) within reach of the area. An unarmed UH-1 Huey, airborne in the vicinity of Da Lat, responded.

To get in, the helicopter would have to avoid the kind of withering fire that had driven off the gunships. Mueller had the Huey approach from the west with the glare of the setting sun behind it and in the eyes of the gunners on the ground. To draw away the attention and fire of the enemy, Mueller made a pass at "moderately low altitude" on the eastern edge of the NVA position, then doubled back for another pass several hundred feet higher.

The distraction worked. The Huey swept in, almost without opposition, and picked up the Rangers and Wilbanks.

By this time, the strike forces had arrived and they obliterated the enemy position. The NVA withdrew to the south, pursued into the night by F-4s, F-100s, and A-1s, aided by AC-47 gunships dropping flares.

Photos courtesy Wilbanks family



Medal of Honor presentation. Back (l-r), father Travis Wilbanks, Secretary of the Air Force Harold Brown, wife Rosemary Wilbanks, USAF Chief of Staff Gen. John McConnell, mother Ruby Wilbanks. Foreground, son Thomas and daughter Paula Ann.

The Huey headed to Bao Loc and medical help for Wilbanks, but it was too late. He died en route.

The Rangers lost 36 men in the ambush at the plantation, but it could have been much worse. The commander of the Rangers said later, "If it hadn't been for Captain Wilbanks' harassment of the enemy, my losses would have been two or three times as large."

"He did everything he could to stop the VC from taking our forward squads," said Sgt. 1st Class Clifton Tanksley, senior NCO advisor to the South Vietnamese Rangers. Tanksley had gone with Vote to pull Wilbanks out of the wreckage. "It looked for a while like nothing they could do would stop him because they were all firing at him. Me and all my men are proud to fight beside a man like him."

Medal of Honor

The Medal of Honor was awarded posthumously to Wilbanks for his actions in this engagement. It was presented to his wife, Rosemary Wilbanks, at the Pentagon, Jan. 24, 1968, by Secretary of the Air Force Harold Brown and the Air Force Chief of Staff, Gen. John P. McConnell. She was accompanied at the presentation by her two older children and by her husband's parents. Norman Mueller, who was to be a steadfast friend of the family in the years that followed, was there as well.

The citation for the Medal of Honor

said that "Capt. Wilbanks recognized that close support aircraft could not arrive in time to enable the Rangers to withstand the advancing enemy onslaught. With full knowledge of the limitations of his unarmed, unarmored, light reconnaissance aircraft and the great danger imposed by the enemy's vast firepower, he unhesitatingly assumed a covering, close support role. ... His daring tactics successfully interrupted the enemy advance, allowing the Rangers to withdraw to safety from their perilous position."

In 1984, the Air Force presented the town of Cornelia a reproduction of Wilbanks' Medal of Honor portrait that hangs in the Pentagon. It was placed on display in the town library.

Most of the memorials and remembrances came later, though.

In September 2000, the Forward Air Controller Memorial was dedicated at Hurlburt Field, honoring the 219 FACs who were killed in action in Vietnam. Wilbanks is recognized by a bronze plaque on a pedestal near an O-1E Bird Dog aircraft. Mrs. Wilbanks was there to place a wreath, as was Angela Bennett, whose father, Capt. Steven L. Bennett, an OV-10 FAC, had also been awarded the Medal of Honor, also posthumously, for valor in Vietnam. (See "Impossible Odds in SAM-7 Alley," December 2004, p. 52.)

In April 2001, Wilbanks was inducted into the Georgia Aviation Hall of Fame at Warner Robins, Ga. It was a formal affair, at which Mueller spoke. Wilbanks' flying suit, blue service uniform, dog tags, notebook, and other personal items are exhibited there at the Museum of Aviation.

The Air Support Operations Building at Ft. Benning, Ga., was dedicated to Wilbanks in October 2001. Mrs. Wilbanks was presented the Vietnamese Ranger badge on behalf of the US Ranger advisors. In September 2003, USAF Pilot Training Class 55-P, of which Wilbanks was a member, sponsored a granite bench with his name on it at the National Museum of the US Air Force in Dayton, Ohio.

There have been numerous other remembrances as well. The most recent came at the new Air Force Memorial, dedicated in 2006 and overlooking Arlington National Cemetery and the Pentagon. Wilbanks' name, along with those of other Medal of Honor recipients, is prominently inscribed on a granite wall.

Wilbanks' hometown of Cornelia built a six-foot-tall, two-sided, black granite memorial marker, dedicated in July 2001. On its sides are a laser-etched portrait of Wilbanks, an image of his O-1E Bird Dog, and the citation for his Medal of Honor.

Mrs. Wilbanks placed a wreath and the memorial was unveiled by the four Wilbanks children, Paula Ann Wilbanks Tharp, Thomas Eugene Wilbanks, and the twins, John Hilliard Wilbanks and Deborah Louise Wilbanks Almand. Several of the Hilliards' grandchildren were there, as were other members of the family. Norman Mueller spoke, recounting the events of the Medal of Honor mission, and Jonathan Myer, who had known Wilbanks in FAC training, sang his composition, "Willie Wilbanks' One-Man War."

Air Force F-16s flew overhead in the missing man formation, and the International Bird Dog Association conducted a flyover in O-1Es. A light rain was falling, but 1,500 people—almost half the population of the town—turned out for the ceremony. The monument stands on the grounds of the Cornelia Community House, some 250 yards from where Hilliard Wilbanks was born. ■

John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force Magazine for 18 years and is now a contributing editor. His most recent article, "The Pentagon Papers," appeared in the February issue.