

## *Hit my smoke: Australian pilots targeting the enemy in Vietnam*

by Peter Condon with Chris Clark

*Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1997; second edition, petercondon@icunet.com.au; 2021; 263 pp; ISBN 978-0-646-83806-9 (soft cover); RRP \$37.99*



This is the story of 36 Australian airmen who fought in Vietnam from 1966 to 1971 when Royal Australian Air Force pilots served as airborne Forward Air Controllers (FAC) with the primary role of directing the precise delivery of aerial ordnance by tactical strike aircraft against targets on the ground. Their job was to target enemy forces, while ensuring the safety of friendly forces. It was high pressure work and constantly exposed them to enemy fire.

*Hit my smoke* was first published in 1997 by Chris Clark and a revised version was published in 2021, updated by Clark with additional material provided by Peter Condon, who served as a FAC in Vietnam in 1969. The revised edition adds the stories of six airmen whose accounts were not available at the time of the first publication.

One of Australia's best-known writers of military history, Dr Chris Clark (formerly known as Chris Coulthard-Clark) graduated from the Royal Military College, Duntroon in 1972, and gained his PhD from the Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra in 1991. A Captain in the Army, he resigned to join the public service in 1979. He was the RAAF historian from 2004 until 2013 heading the Office of Air Force History. Before that, he was historian for Post-1945 Conflicts at the Australian War Memorial and is the author of *A Heritage of Spirit; Duntroon; No Australian Need Apply; Action Stations Coral Sea; The Third Brother; Edge of Centre*, and many historical articles and reviews.

Chris Clark wrote The RAAF in Vietnam volume of the Official War History project in 1995 before writing *Hit my smoke*.

In the introduction, Clark provides an excellent overview of the history of the FAC roles, including development in WW II by the RAAF, and the expansion of the FAC role in the Korean War by the U.S. Army, and the very significant employment of FACs in the Vietnam War by the United States Air Force (USAF). At the height of the war, allied tactical aircraft flew 700 missions a day south of the Demilitarised Zone. These missions were directed by FACs.

Selected RAAF fighter pilots were trained as FACs in Australia before being posted to Vietnam where they were placed under American command and were part of the USAF. There were generally three RAAF FACs in country at any one time and they served where required by the USAF - from I Corps in the north, to IV Corps in the Delta. Some flew the O-1 Bird Dog which had its military origins with the U.S. Army in the Korean War, or

the O-2A, Super Skymaster, a civilian light aircraft modified for the FAC role, while the majority flew the OV-10 Bronco, an aircraft designed specifically for combat operations. The Bronco aircraft on display in the Australian War Memorial was flown by eight RAAF FACs in Vietnam.

*Hit my smoke* deals with each of the nine "batches" of pilots who served in Vietnam, containing the pilots' story, in their own words. Clark provides a prelude to each batch in which he provides a brief Service history of the pilots and context of the tactical situation where they served.

While exposed to enemy fire, the FACs were certainly not impervious to it. An extract from one pilot's story, "without warning, the Bronco's controls froze at an altitude of 1400 feet. The aircraft starting spinning earthwards and attempts to regain control proved futile." The pilot successfully ejected. He was rescued by a small helicopter by hanging on to its skids until it too was shot down. He was later rescued by a second helicopter.

Individual narratives are well written, easy to read and very interesting. While there is a consistency across the range of stories, it doesn't distract from the overall effect of the book, and I found each story absorbed my interest. The stories are very much matter-of-fact and neither understate nor overstate the actions of the individuals; however, the intensity of their missions is revealing. It is telling that of the 36 RAAF pilots who served as FACs, there were two Distinguished Service Orders, 15 Distinguished Flying Crosses and six Mentioned-in-Despatches awarded within the group. There were also many foreign gallantry awards bestowed upon them.

While much of the Australian public's attention was captured by events in the Phuoc Tuy province with the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Task Force, no group, with the possible exception of the Australian Army Training Team saw more action on a consistent, almost daily basis across the combat arena in South Vietnam, than did the FAC organisation.

*Hit my smoke* has an excellent index and an interesting collection of photographs, many in colour. It is very well produced and would be an asset on any bookshelf. It will appeal to readers with an interest in military history and will provide an added perspective to the account of Australian participation in the war in Vietnam. Copies can be purchased from the Australian War Memorial shop or on-line from lulu.com.

**Bob Treloar**