

# PREFACE

GARY N. WILLIS, RED MARKER 18

For about seven months during the Vietnam War, I served with the Red Marker Forward Air Controllers. This unit supported the Vietnamese Airborne Division from 1962 to 1973. Forty years later, I began contacting others from the unit. I found that the Forward Air Controllers Association had a database including many former Red Markers, but that no complete roster existed. Thus began the "Red Marker Roster Project." Each person I contacted recalled additional names to add to the list. Furthermore, each had interesting stories to tell or photographs to share. Over a six-month period, the roster project morphed into a history project.

Researching unit histories, personal diaries and stories already published confirmed that the Red Marker detachment was unique. It was the only FAC unit that operated in all four Corps areas of Vietnam. As this history began to take shape, I saw that I could easily fall into the trap of writing nostalgia. The generally outstanding performance of the Red Marker FACs and of the Airborne might support or even deserve that approach. However, that would be fantasy. This history opts for accuracy, trusting that the total picture is realistic.

For example, highly qualified fighter pilots initially staffed the unit. These were Majors and senior Captains who were experts in tactical air support. Over the years, however, the Air Force ran out of experienced personnel and began sending FACs newly graduated from pilot training. Most of these young pilots performed exceptionally well, but their lack of flying experience is reflected in the accident record. Low-time Lieutenants piloted each of the Red Marker aircraft that were involved in accidents. One died in a mid-air collision.

In later years, the unit also reflected the disparate views of an American population grown tired of a long and ultimately fruitless war. Some pilots and ground crewmen were eager participants. Others were more reluctant, questioning the value of their contributions and the long separations from their families. Regardless of background, experience or motivation, however, Red Markers performed their mission with skill and courage. This history tracks the evolution of the unit from the beginning to the end.

I greatly appreciate all who contributed to this effort both for their service in the unit

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and for sharing their memories and stories. I especially thank my wife, Robin Rankin Willis, for her love and support during my Vietnam tour, during the completion of this book and for the forty years in between. She edited the entire book and is responsible for its readability. Any errors, grammatical or otherwise, are mine.

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