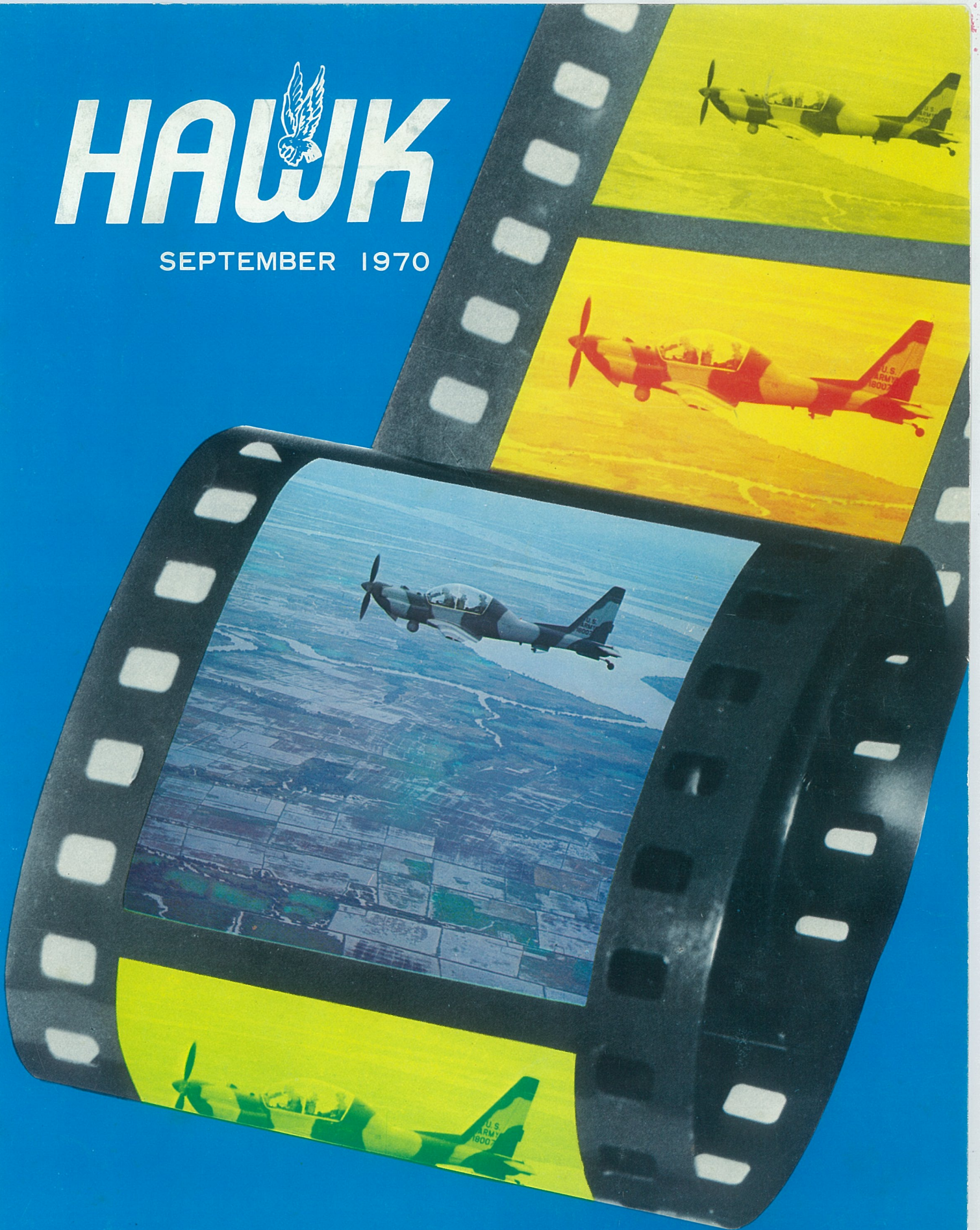


HAWK

SEPTEMBER 1970







A 220th RAC "Bird dog" recon in the A Shau Valley.

ROADRUNNER COUNTRY

*Story and Photos by
SP5 Brian S. Shortell*

HAWK



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FRONT COVER:

The newest member of the Army Aviation inventory, the YO-3A, flies "quietly" over Vietnam seeking out enemy encampments and supply caches. Photo by CWO Michael S. Lopez. Story on page 19.

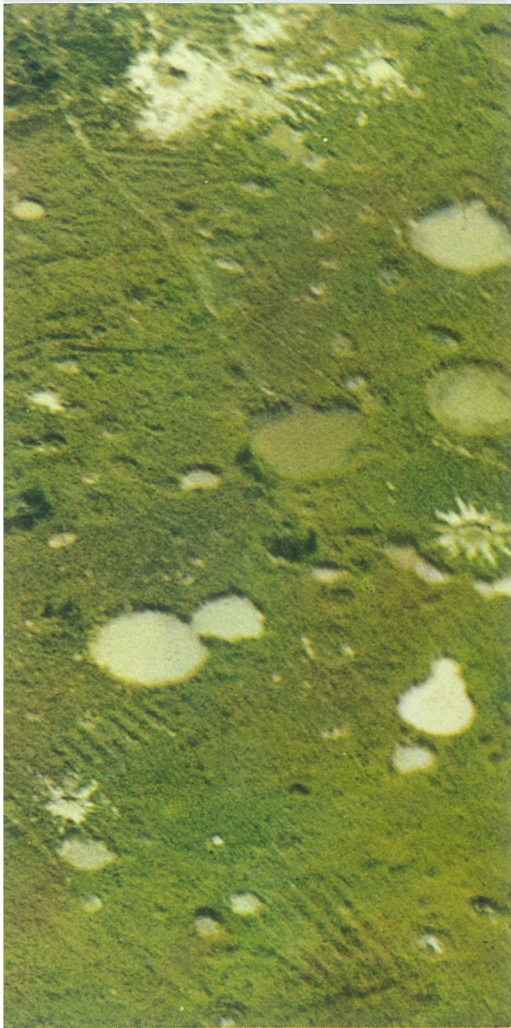


BACK COVER:

Lines of age are also those of experience and learning. This elderly woman has lived and worked in Vung Tau for many years and goes every morning to sell her wares in the market. Photo by 1LT Tom Turner.



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As you travel north, the boundaries of South Vietnam narrow a great deal, virtually converging at the demilitarized zone. Any map will acknowledge this fact, but it cannot begin to show the most distinctive features of the area—scarred, pock-marked and crawling with North Vietnamese soldiers.

The hostile terrain of I Corps has been a scene for many of the more notable battles of the Vietnam War. Foremost are such familiar names as Khe Sanh, Hamburger Hill, and A Shau.

Much has been written of these skirmishes and the events that led to them. Too often, however, the accounts neglect the intricate plan-

ning involved and the units that support the “behind the scenes” activity.

The men of the 212th Combat Aviation Battalion, headquartered at Marble Mountain Air Facility in Da Nang, are among those who choose to forego the glories of notoriety. The “Roadrunners” provide aviation support with both fixed and rotary wing aircraft to designated Free World Military Assistance Forces in the I Corps Tactical Zone.

Composed of two Reconnaissance Airplane Companies (RAC), a Surveillance Airplane Company (SAC), Corps Aviation Company (CAC), and an Assault Helicopter Company (AHC), the 212th units are sometimes referred to as the “eyes of I Corps”. Appropriately, SSG Dennis Martin of the 101st Airborne remarks, “they really are very much like eyes. You don’t notice how much they do for you until you don’t have them. And, in I Corps, there is so much for them to see.”

There are numerous types of

operational aircraft within the battalion, allowing for a wide variety of missions.

The 220th RAC operates the O-1 “Birddog” in Northern I Corps—an area including such enemy infested spots as the DMZ and Tri-border areas.

From their position in the air, “Cat Killer” pilots of the 220th are able to detect seemingly impossible targets on the ground. In the opinion of Major John H. Stokes III, commanding officer, “It may take up to four months for a pilot to learn the terrain, but at some point he will learn it like the back of his hand and become an invaluable asset to the entire allied effort.”

The 21st RAC “Black Aces” use the same aircraft to recon the rest of I Corps. Headquartered at Chu Lai, the mission of the 21st is similar to that of the 220th in Hue-Phu Bai.

In addition to visual reconnaissance missions (VR), these bird-dog pilots direct Naval gunfire and Army artillery to their targets.

A Mohawk from the 131st SAC flies a reconnaissance mission along the coast near the DMZ.





A Charlie Model Gunship from the 282nd AHC provides gun cover for a Marine "Sea Knight" as a beleaguered outpost is resupplied.

They may double as forward air controllers in directing Army helicopter or Marine tactical air strikes while busily reconning an area for further signs of enemy activity.

The big sister to the RAC companies is the 131st SAC, better known as "Spuds." For their mission, the Spuds utilize the OV-1 "Mohawk"—a twin turbine all-weather aircraft that distinguishes itself in the Army inventory by its speed, maneuverability, and sophistication.

The Mohawk, designed especially for reconnaissance, provides the capability of three separate surveillance missions. Mounted with a camera system, it can furnish single or sequence shots of point and route targets. The Side Looking Airborne Radar (SLAR) system allows the crew to scan an entire province area. Utilizing an infrared sensor system—detecting temperature differences—intelligence gathered indicates whether or not a location is occupied.

The Spuds require highly skilled personnel both to fly the aircraft as well as operate the sensor systems. Mohawk pilots are the end result of a rigid selection process among "top of the line" aviators. Likewise, technical operators (TO's) occupy a class all their own. Enlisted men by rank, TO's are also the cream of the crop.

How do such talented crews work together? SP4 Richard Keyster, a TO with the 131st, sums it up. "The aircraft belongs to the pilot and the mission belongs to the TO." He might have added that the complete reassurance that the other man can do his job allows you to better concentrate on yours.

Among the men of the 131st, morale runs high. Another unit with a radiant spirit is the 62nd CAC, the Royal Coachmen, who say of themselves, "When you care enough to send the very best, call for the Royal Coachmen."

Outfitting their Huey's, Kiowas, and sleek U-21's with the finest in Army passenger service equipment,

the "Royal Coachmen" are noted for their VIP passenger treatment and attention to meticulous detail. "Service with a smile," beamed SP5 Eddie Gonzales, "and proud to do it."

The 282nd AHC rounds out the units of the 212th. The single Assault Helicopter Company in the battalion, the "Black Cats" provide a diversified effort throughout I Corps.

Maintaining eight C-model gunships and 21 Hueys, the Black Cats operational capabilities include combat assault, liaison, and resupply, throughout the entire I Corps area.

It may be difficult to characterize the 212th battalion in any one mold, owing to their varied missions and types of aircraft, but a motto awarded to the unit after the TET offensive of 1968 serves as a clue. "Wings of Freedom" is that motto and it very well describes the purpose of the 212th, in the busiest Corps in Nam.