

FLYING THE "DRUT" IN VIETNAM

By Warren E. Thompson



From 1965 to 1968, VMCJ-1 was heavily involved in electronic warfare over North Vietnam. This view shows the EF-10Bs carrying the long-range external fuel tanks that gave them the ability to go all the way to Hanoi if the mission called for it. (Photo courtesy of Jerry Westphal)

During the very early stages of the Vietnam War, the Marines had a specialized aircraft that was capable of jamming enemy radars: the Douglas EF-10B. This aircraft, a derivative of the F3D Skyknight (and affectionately known as the "Drut"—turd spelled backwards), had been a very effective night fighter against the MiG-15 over "MiG Alley" in the Korean War. In the years following that war, the development of radar-guided surface-to-air missiles (SAM) advanced rapidly. In Vietnam, the United States learned this the hard way, when deadly SAM sites started cropping up all over North Vietnam, especially around the Hanoi area.

The only aircraft at the time capable of handling the SAM threat were the F3D-2Q and EF-10B. The Marines were well versed in applying the anti-SAM technology that made the aircraft very effective at countering missile sites. Marine Composite Reconnaissance Squadron (VMCJ) 1 employed that technology in Vietnam and did an excellent job of backing up Navy and Air Force strikes north of the demilitarized zone (DMZ). By the early 1960s, the aircraft was considered obsolete as it was a slow, straight-wing platform that was thrown into a supersonic, swept-wing arena. The primary purpose of the Drut's jammer was to identify and block fire control radars that made SAMs so effective. That was not the only mission type, however, flown by EF air crews.

One of VMCJ-1's missions was flying night patrols involving a team effort against Viet Cong road traffic. These flights were different than the regular electronic-countermeasures (ECM) missions in the north, as the former included C-130 flare ships and several bomb-loaded B-57 Canberras. The aircraft often flew in close formation and with zero visibility during new-moon periods. These missions required complete concentration on the part of the EF-10B air crews for hours on end. The main threat usually was not enemy anti-aircraft fire, but vertigo.

One of the Marine pilots who logged a lot of time in the EF-10B north of the DMZ was Lt. H. Wayne Young. "Our role in this was that we would fly wing on a C-130 Hercules flare ship with a couple of B-57s that were orbiting above our track," Young recalled. "If any fire control would crop up against our flight, our ECM guy [right-seater] would pinpoint it and give a fix to the C-130 crew. I don't know exactly what type of gear they had on board, but they would relay the info to the B-57s."

Young said that the C-130 would then drop a string of flares to light up the specific area where the signal was received. The bombers would then line up and make a run on whatever the target was with their ordnance.

"At the end of their bomb run [along Highway 1], the B-57s

would come off their drops and the C-130 would go into a hard right turn and set up a race track pattern for about 90 minutes," said Young. "Here we were sitting on the C-130's wing, in the dark, flying at 190 knots, which was all the big Herc could muster, so we were nearly stalled out trying to maintain position with him. Then [the C-130] would rack his aircraft into a hard right turn and we'd have to slide down underneath him to maintain position and we'd get caught in his prop wash—with our straight-wing EF, we'd be bouncing all over the place! To top that off, the flares would burn out and we would be back in total darkness, usually out over water, so there would be no horizon or reference to focus on except the little white light on the top of the C-130 fuselage. We operated on these missions with all lights off, for obvious reasons. You had no rotating beacon, no navigation lights, and only one light on top of the flare ship as your reference point."

The only safety features in this mission were the pilots' eyes. The glaring light from the flares and exploding ordnance, followed by total darkness, wreaked havoc with night vision. Even as their eyes were adjusting back, they had to remain in tight formation with the C-130.

"When you got down in the prop wash, you knew that you were on the right side or left side," said Young, "but when you were trying to adjust from bright light to darkness, it was extremely dangerous because of the proximity of the two aircraft, and all of this was happening below 10,000 feet. It usually didn't take long to pick up another signal from an enemy position, and then the process started all over again. We maintained radio silence, and the only communications going on was between the controllers inside the Herc and the B-57s."



BuNo 127041 was one of the two EF-10Bs lost to enemy fire, to an SA-2 missile in 1966.

VMCJ-1's most dangerous missions involved escorting Air Force and Navy bombers deep into North Vietnam. The squadron took every precaution to avoid the SAM sites and MiG-17s that were always near in the higher "Route Pack" areas, especially Hanoi and Haiphong. EF-10Bs were very effective in stand-off jamming, which put them directly off the coast, but still well within effective range to jam enemy radars as strike forces converged on their targets. The squadron lost five EF-10Bs during their deployment, but only two as a result of enemy fire (one in 1966 and the other in 1968). Any mission sending them as far north as Hanoi or Haiphong definitely put them in harm's way.

Young was on one of those missions that went all the way to the Haiphong area in 1965. It was a two-ship jamming element; the other EF, piloted by Capt. Chuck Houseman, was the lead. After they finished protecting the strike force, and before they could turn back toward their base, the Air Force asked them for some "extra" duty.

"Our EF-10Bs were definitely a guarded asset, because if we lost one, we couldn't order an immediate replacement [since] they were in very short supply," said Young. "We were equipped with a K-10 camera which was a huge box camera that was excellent in taking aerial images. Also, the fact we were so slow also enhanced the quality of each frame. The [Air Force] asked us to stay up in the area long enough to swing over Haiphong Harbor and get some pictures. On these deep missions, we were always escorted by a couple



Marine Lt. H. Wayne Young flew the EF-10B on a dangerous mission over Haiphong Harbor in 1965. He also flew RF-8s off carriers and RF-4s from the squadron's base at Da Nang. He is shown in front of the VMCJ-1 sign at Da Nang. (Photo courtesy of George Clauser and Wayne Young)



VMCJ-1's ground crew did an outstanding job working on the aging EF-10Bs. These electronic countermeasures aircraft were in great demand, and losses could not be easily replaced. (Photo courtesy of George Clauser)



On some missions up in North Vietnam, more than one EF-10B was used, giving them greater coverage with their jamming gear. In Route Packages 5 and 6 (Hanoi and Haiphong, respectively), the SAM sites were plentiful and all were serious threats to attacking bombers. (Photo courtesy of Jerry Westphal)



VMCJ-1 was one of the most versatile Marine squadrons to serve in the Vietnam War. At one time or another, they flew (from left to right) the RF-4, EF-10B, EA-6A, and RF-8 (not pictured). (Photo courtesy of George Clauser and Wayne Young)

of Marine F-4s, which was rare for our Phantoms as they were usually working close air support for the troops far to the south.”

Both pilots were up for the idea, and instead of making the usual right turn they would ease over the harbor and use their cameras. Houseman told Young to slide about 100 yards off his right wing and slightly behind, so the two cameras would cover a much wider area.

“Just as we turned on the cameras, the sky opened up,” said Young. “We were catching everything they had and I was yelling over the radio to Houseman that we were getting a lot of flak that he couldn’t see because it was behind him. I’m watching all this flak walk right up to my plane and I’m flying a slow, straight-wing “Drut” that is flying at 230 mph instead of being in an RF-8 doing Mach 2. We made the run and got out without any damage. When we returned to base, the CO was upset when he found out what we had done during the latter part of the mission. He called the Air Force and said that if they needed any more missions

like that, he would send his RF-8s rather than risk losing a valuable jammer! This happened to be the last time we went up in that area again in the EF-10B.”

During the three years the Marine “Drut” served in the war, they logged more than 9,000 sorties and provided electronic jamming in support of thousands of bombing strikes by Navy and Air Force aircraft. VMCJ-1 lost five EF-10Bs in the war; all 10 crew members were listed as “killed in action.” The aircraft was replaced with the EA-6A, RF-8, and RF-4 during the remainder of the war. The lion’s share of the electronic warfare missions, however, fell on the shoulders of the Douglas EB-66 Destroyer that the Air Force brought in during the last days of the EFs. It was very effective, and two squadrons carried the brunt of the jamming requirements. 🛩️

Warren Thompson has researched and written on military aviation history for more than 40 years.