



The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Flying the OV-1 Mohawk in combat over Vietnam

BY JIM BUSH

You had to be better than just a good stick as an Army aviator to be selected to fly the Mohawk in Vietnam. The enemy on the ground was bad enough to contend with, but the ever-changing weather, mountainous ter-

rain, and political infighting between military branches—on how the Mohawk would be used and armed—was a never-ending battle for the crews.

The Grumman Mohawk, at first glance, was described by some as a bug-

eyed, hideous monster, with its two turbine engines and a triple tail. But to the men who flew her in combat, including the three Army aviators you are about to meet, she was a lady in the air, one that brought her boys home safely.



JIM KOEPNICK



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Maj. Gen William Page – then and now.

**Maj. Gen. William Page,
U.S. Army (retired)**

I had been flying L-19 Bird Dogs in flight school at Fort Rucker when I saw the OV-1 Mohawk for the first time in the summer of 1960. I thought it was one of the ugliest, funniest-looking aircraft I had ever seen, but yet it had an indescribable charm about it, one that I would grow to love and appreciate firsthand. Two years later I was in the second class of Army aviators to go through Mohawk transition at Fort Rucker.

Although the Mohawk was initially a joint venture between the Army and the Marine Corps as an enhanced surveillance and fire control aircraft, the Marines bowed out of the program early in its development. In my opin-



ion, the Marines made a huge mistake with that decision, because the Mohawk ended up possessing tremendous flight capabilities and proved to be versatile enough to adapt to most any mission. To me the OV-1 was maybe not quite as hot as a P-38 Lightning or the P-51 Mustang, but every bit as tough and airworthy as the P-40 Tomahawk or the F6F Hellcat of World War II fame.

The Army had originally planned for us to fly the Mohawks as surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft, so my early transition training was learning to maximize the excellent flight capabilities of the aircraft, with some work on the employment of the yet-to-be-developed infrared (IR) and side-looking airborne radar (SLAR) surveillance systems.

Since the Marines were involved in the original design, however, the Mohawk also ended up being built with all of the wiring and hard points (bomb racks) needed for a Marine air-to-ground attack/spotter aircraft. That “unintended” original capability quickly came into play early in the Mohawk’s history with the Army.

In the early 1960s, when Army aviation started developing the air assault concept at Fort Benning, Georgia, the Army brass assigned a new role for the Mohawk as a fire-support platform capable of providing fire support and cover for the air assault helicopters and troops inserted on the battlefield.

As one of the first Mohawk pilots assigned to the newly formed 11th Air Assault Division (Test) in early 1963, I spent the next two and a half years dropping bombs, firing Zuni rockets, and strafing targets on installations and ranges all over the southeastern United States.

The Mohawk was rock-steady as a gun platform, and our Navy instructor pilots (IPs) who taught us our initial gunnery training at Naval Air Station Jacksonville really loved flying the small attack aircraft. It was they who affectionately nicknamed the Mohawk “Little Bear.”

During our Air Assault testing days, our standard armament package on the

24 “Little Bear” attack Mohawks (JOV-1A) of the 226th Attack and Escort Battalion consisted of one Zuni pod under each wing with four 5-inch Zuni rockets per pod, two drop tanks, and two .50-caliber machine gun pods along with 1,700 rounds of ammo. Needless to say, for a relatively small attack aircraft the Mohawk was a well-armed and accurate close-air support platform, and a hell of a strafing weapon.

Throughout the entire two and a half years of the Air Assault test, the Mohawk was second to none in anybody’s mind as we proved time and time again its undisputable effectiveness as a close-air support rocket-firing gunship for the troops on the ground. Unfortunately politics came into play during the spring of 1965, and we lost our guns to the concerns of the Air Force, who demanded that there be no armament of any kind on any Army fixed-wing aircraft.

With a great loss of capability for us and our soldiers on the ground, all of our Mohawks were converted over to IR, SLAR, and photo reconnaissance birds. Fortunately, the gun-toting Mohawks that were already in Vietnam kept their guns for a while longer as the Pentagon turned a blind eye.

In the summer of 1965 the 11th Air Assault Division became the 1st Cavalry Division (Air Assault), and we loaded our remaining Mohawks aboard the USS Boxer as we set sail for Vietnam. Our ASTA (Aerial Surveillance Target Acquisition) platoon consisted of six Mohawks based at An Khe in the central highlands of South Vietnam. Two of the Mohawks were OV-1B SLAR models, and the remaining four were IR OV-1Cs.

Most of our missions were at night flying low-level (500 feet or less) IR flights looking for the cooking fires of the VC/NVA (Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army) below. If we found the enemy we were not allowed to attack. We were there to gather information for our intelligence spooks and planners. Most of us who flew this mission described it as “looking for the next battle.”

The NVA did not like the Mohawk and many of them referred to its qui-



etness as “whispering death.” We were shot at a lot by the NVA, mostly with AK-47 or .30-caliber rounds. Most of the time on night missions the tracer rounds arced harmlessly behind us as the enemy shot at the sound of the engines overhead. But, it was on the daytime photo missions when we were hit the most. All you would hear was “whap, whap, whap” as the rifle rounds impacted against the Mohawk. The most holes I ever brought back was six, but it was a typical Grumman “Iron Works” airplane, and those bullet strikes didn’t hurt it one bit!

I completed my first tour in Vietnam in August of 1966 with 480 hours of combat time. I was reassigned and continued to fly Mohawks in Germany along the Czechoslovakian and East German border looking for unusual Soviet movements with the help of the SLAR pod we carried on the lower right side of the fuselage.

I cannot stress enough the confidence I had in the OV-1. We did not cancel one mission the year I flew Mohawks in Germany, 95 percent of the time at night and early morning, and in all kinds of adverse weather.

We punched through anything that was in our path instead of going around it. I can remember a number of missions where I would have a foot of ice sticking straight out from my leading edges, nose and drop tanks, and Saint Elmo’s Fire dancing across the windshield, but the airplane couldn’t have cared less and flew on as if it was no big deal. The trust I had in that airplane is unequalled to anything else I

have ever flown. Period.

In April of 1969 I returned to Vietnam as a company commander in charge of 18 Mohawks and 330 officers and men at Phu Hiep in II Corp. To my delight I found that the horsepower of the Lycoming T53 engines had been increased tremendously, giving the Mohawk even greater capabilities. This became a lifesaver on foggy nights when you had to penetrate the fog and try to climb out of the mountain valley as close to straight up as you possibly could.

Also, because of the increased power, I used to enjoy going out in our dual-control pilot-training aircraft (that was void of the mission equipment package) and tangling with the Air Force jocks in their OV-10 Broncos. It wasn’t all work, you know; we had to have some fun every once in a while!

The Mohawk could fly circles around the OV-10, primarily by out-diving them. You could roll the Mohawk over, point the nose straight down, and see 340 knots in a heartbeat. The only thing you saw in your rearview mirror was the tiny speck of a Bronco acting more like a mule than a wild horse. Then a quick 4g pullout and climb back to altitude into an Immelmann, and you would have him at a lower altitude and in your sights.

But what really frustrated a Bronco pilot was when we got them in a tight turn. I would suck back on the stick pulling 4g’s until we almost hit a high-speed stall, then at 140 knots crank in a little flap and in-board aileron, and before we had gone through another 360 degrees I would be tight on his



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tail. You could always count on a good bit of foul language "on 243.0" about this time. Nothing better than a measly Army aviator beating up on some misplaced Air Force fighter jock.

I will be the first to tell anyone, I fell in love with the Mohawk the very first day I ever flew it, and it will always be the best and most trusted airplane I have ever flown.

William A. "Andy" Rux Maj., U.S. Army (retired) Lt. Col., Oregon National Guard (retired)

I graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1960. I wanted to get into flying but was given a two-year non-flying assignment instead. In 1962 I was told I was up for a short one-year tour at a place called

Vietnam. I had never heard of it and asked what my options were.

I was told I could opt for a flying slot instead, as long as I agreed to stay on for a few more years. I flew Bird Dogs and Beavers in Germany and acquired more than 1,000 hours, flying in all kinds of weather. In 1966 after my three years was up I decided to opt out of the Army. Unfortunately, the commander in chief thought otherwise and said I was going to Vietnam.

Fortunately I was able to talk the Army out of training me as a helicopter pilot and was instead sent to Mohawk transition training. I was very impressed with the power of those two turbine engines along with the fighter-like agility of the bug-eyed Grumman.

Early on I found that there were two kinds of Mohawk pilots: those that loved it and those that hated it. I was in the first group, and absolutely loved flying the OV-1. Some of the guys were intimidated and scared of it because of some early accidents during engine-out procedures.

The Mohawk picked up an undeserved reputation as a "widow-maker," and I think some of that had to do with single-engine Bird Dog pilots flying a much more complex airplane. Thankfully I had an old, cigar-chomping, ex-crop duster pilot show me the finer points of flying a Mohawk without any engines.

As we climbed to 3,000 feet he leaned over and said to me, "How would you like to see an engine-out landing?" Before I could respond, the instructor was reaching for the throttles through the thick cigar smoke and proceeded to shut both engines down. Now I don't mean he feathered the props; I mean everything went





quiet as we became a Grumman glider! He circled silently over the airfield, pointed the nose down, and greased the Mohawk on to the runway. I knew right then and there that this airplane had a lot of capabilities.

Before I was sent over to Vietnam I was sent to the gunnery school and taught how to fire the weaponry that included .50-caliber machine guns and 2.75-inch rockets. We were taught to stay off the rudders when firing the rockets and to move the airplane into the slipstream, because of the weather-vaning effect of the rockets. The Mohawk was an awesome weapons platform as it proved itself time and again in Vietnam.

I arrived in the country in mid-1966 and was stationed up north in the Marine sector with the 131st Aviation Battalion at a place called Hue Phu Bi. We had six Mohawks when I arrived: two SLARs, two IRs, and two gun and camera daytime VR (visual reconnaissance) models. All of our missions were secret, as we flew out of the country into Laos searching and scanning the Ho Chi Minh trail for the ever-moving NVA.

Anyone who says that the Tet offensive in 1968 was a big surprise is pulling your leg. From 1966 to 1967 I observed firsthand the NVA building a long road off the main north/south Ho Chi Minh trail that went east, right toward Hue Phu Bi, one of the targets of the Tet offensive.

Most of my flights were in the VR birds because of my past gunnery training, and these were some of the most dangerous. We usually went out as a two-ship Mohawk flight operating right on the deck looking for trail ac-

tivity such as trucks, bicycles, and people. The thing that saved us time and time again was the lack of sound the Mohawk made, as it was very quiet until we went zooming by the enemy on the ground. They never had a chance to bring their big guns to bear on us.

Most of the hits we took were from small-arms fire. If you didn't come back from a mission with at least one bullet hole in the airplane you were accused of "slacking off."

We didn't know much about gross weight in Vietnam as we piled everything but a kitchen sink onto the Mohawks. We just climbed aboard, firewalled it, and off we went. Grumman built the best airplanes as far as I'm concerned.

The camaraderie in our unit was second to none, probably because we were such a small group that flew daily together protecting one another. Flying the daytime gunnery flights was strictly by volunteering, and there were times when some of the new guys wanted to become VR pilots. I remember one guy who was itching to get into VRs and was all excited to go on his orientation flight. I put him in the right seat and off we went looking for targets on the Ho trail.

We found some hootches, and I decided to show him how we fired the rockets. I rolled the Mohawk over in a 60-degree dive as we built up speed going downhill. I was always taught to "pickle and pull," as I yanked the Mohawk up 3 to 3.5g's, just before blacking out. As I popped off a couple of rockets and pulled back hard on the stick, I looked over at the guy in the right seat and saw him hanging in his

straps, totally blacked out.

As I continued my climb uphill, "Mr. Excitement" began to wake up and never said another word to me. It wasn't until we landed that he jumped out of the cockpit and said, "Man, I don't want anything to do with you guys. You're crazy!"

Because we were based out of Hue Phu Bi, all of our meals and entertainment were on our compound, as we weren't allowed to leave at night. Needless to say we had the typical Army mess made with reconstituted milk, and most of us lost a lot of weight.

We figured out a way, though, to get at least one good meal a week, as we went out on our Saturday VR flights. Instead of turning around and coming back home, we continued our flight over Laos and flew into Thailand to the home of the 555th "Triple Nickel" Fighter Squadron based at Ubon. We would spend the night and eat "real food" with real ice cream in the Air Force mess. On the next morning we would fly our normal mission over Laos and return to Vietnam.

In early January of 1967 I was part of a two-ship Mohawk flight that approached Ubon airfield to land. We had gotten used to the practice at our home base of screaming over the runway at 300 feet and then pitching the Mohawk up into a break for landing. Well that's what we both did that day, as we flew in trail low and fast over the Air Force runway. Right before we shut down, the tower called us and said that the base commander would like to see us once we got squared away. We had no idea what he wanted, but we found out in a hurry.



Steve Hammons,
Maj., U.S. Army (retired)

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Guard (retired)**

I graduated as an OV-1 pilot on my way to Vietnam in 1969. I was stationed with II Corp along the South Vietnamese coast near a small village called Phu Hiep. I was a member of the 225 Surveillance Airplane Company at Phu Heip Army Airfield.

Most of my flights were nighttime IR missions, as we went looking for NVA activity on the ground. With that big boom sticking out of my right side we had the ability to map terrain, look both left and right up to 100 kilometers. We could pick any metal object, including a bicycle moving at 3 or 4 miles per hour, and it would show as a small black dot on the mapping screen in front of the right-seater.

Flying around mountainous terrain at night in all kinds of weather was just as deadly to a Mohawk crew as was the NVA on the ground. But by and large, nighttime was when we did our best work. We were not well-advertised, so to speak, because of the sensitive nature of our missions, and some of our commanders considered us “magic and mirrors.”

On a typical mission we were given 10 to 20 different targets they wanted us to shoot and recon. Most of the IR flights were low-level, running through a valley or following a stream, looking for the cooking fires of the NVA as they sat and ate their rice.

I really got to know the Mohawk and its equipment as I flew down

canyons in pitch-black darkness, with hills rising above me on both sides. Needless to say, I became very close with the electronics guys sitting next to me.

On one mission I took some hits from some small-arms fire in the back of the airplane. The problem was, I was just about to turn final to land back at base and the fire was coming from the village right next to the airfield. But that was typical all over Vietnam, as the people in the villages were our allies during the day, until nightfall, when they put their straw hats and black pajamas on, that’s when they raised holy cane with us.

After my tour in Vietnam I returned to the states and became a Mohawk instructor pilot. I eventually joined the Oregon National Guard and continued my love affair with the OV-1. I continued to fly the Mohawk in a combat mode, this time against Mother Nature.

We used the SLAR and IR Mohawks to assist in fighting forest fires, and our Guard unit was the first to discover the crack in Mount St. Helens before she blew her top in 1980.

I ended up flying the Mohawk a little more than 8,000 hours, but the reality of it is this: You can have all the time in the world, and all it takes is to make one mistake and become complacent. About the only thing I contribute all those hours to, compared to other guys, is the fact that I had bigger hemorrhoids! To me the OV-1 Mohawk was the best airplane the Army ever had.

