The Hand-Held Camera Program Provides Timely Intelligence to Tactical Commanders in Vietnam

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In mid-December 1966, an US Air Force (USAF) Forward Air Controller (FAC) approached the personnel of B Detachment, 1st Military Intelligence Battalion (Aerial Reconnaissance Support) (MIBARS) located at Da Nang in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). He was concerned about activity he observed in a nearby hamlet while patrolling for the 20th Tactical Air Support Squadron. At his approach, the residents of the hamlet ran to hide. While not unusual for local inhabitants to flee at the appearance of the FAC O-1 Bird Dog aircraft, which was often followed by a B-52 bomber, the FAC was uncertain if this particular hamlet was a true military target.

B Detachment had no existing imagery for that specific area and decided the best course of action was to send an observer with the FAC to look for themselves. While overflying the area at low altitude, the Detachment B observer used a hand-held 35mm camera to take photos. After processing the film, the Imagery Interpretation Section analyzed the photos and informed the chain of command that the behavior observed in the village was suspicious, especially considering the presence of several openings to what looked like underground facilities. Their opinion was that the hamlet housed a Viet Cong indoctrination camp and the reinforced, man-made entryways were bunkers or tunnel complexes. Based on this analysis, a US Marines force attacked the camp and destroyed the facility, which was indeed an enemy underground complex.

Thus began the 1st MIBARS Hand-Held Camera Program, later renamed the Low Altitude Tactical Target Acquisition (LATTA) program.

The 1st MIBARS served as a special unit of the 525th MI Group in the RVN from 1965 to 1972. Its personnel analyzed and interpreted photographs and other aerial imagery acquired by USAF reconnaissance aircraft. The MIBARS was headquartered in Saigon,
but had five detachments stationed with US forces in the corps tactical zones: A at Bien Hoa, B at Da Nang, C at Can Tho, D at Nha Trang, and E at Phu Bai.

The Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) J2, Maj. Gen. Joseph McChristian recalled, “We became particularly satisfied with the arrangement, even though all the Air Force photography missions were flown out of Tan Son Nhut. By virtue of the [MIBARS’] personal contact with the reconnaissance wing and the [detachments’] close relationship with ground units, the battalion personnel contributed immeasurably to developing a truly joint effort in photo intelligence.”

However, timely intelligence from aerial reconnaissance in Vietnam was frequently hampered by the weather and physical environment. Target areas were often located in areas of dense foliage, making medium or high altitude photography of little value. Rain and low cloud cover, particularly during the monsoon season, commonly grounded USAF photographic missions. Tactical commanders could rarely anticipate their needs for aerial photography far enough in advance for the USAF to meet their requirements given these environmental constraints.

The LATTA program mitigated many of these restrictions and was able to get the commander the information he needed, often within a 24-hour window. Although the quality of the photography could not match that of aircraft-mounted camera systems, the quick turn-around was a distinct advantage in fluid tactical situations.

What started in one detachment soon expanded to all five of the MIBARS detachments and then to organic unit programs throughout the RVN. Although the MIBARS would continue to provide photographers, equipment, reproduction services, and imagery interpretation as needed, the intent of the program was to have units use their own personnel and aircraft. Hand-held camera instruction was given as part of the three-day G2 Air Orientation Course. Additionally, MIBARS personnel provided detailed on-the-job training for photographic processing techniques and camera use.
Through the LATTA program, 1\textsuperscript{st} MIBARS or the personnel it trained located enemy communication sites, base camps, weapons positions, and camouflaged bunkers throughout the corps tactical zones. Ground commanders were then able to expeditiously destroy enemy targets by calling in strike aircraft or sending out ground artillery or reaction forces. LATTA was also used successfully in battle damage assessment, landing zone site selection, surveillance, and target confirmation.

The LATTA program illustrates the innovative efforts of intelligence personnel in Vietnam to make their product of more value to the tactical commander. The key to LATTA success was the curtailed response time, so critical in a fluid tactical environment like the insurgency in Vietnam. Organic aerial observation programs in the tactical units, gave commanders nearly immediate access to highly perishable intelligence. Consequently, what was reported on the ground was still there when ground forces arrived. The LATTA program also freed up the personnel of the MIBARS to focus on the more highly technical imagery products from USAF and Army reconnaissance platforms.