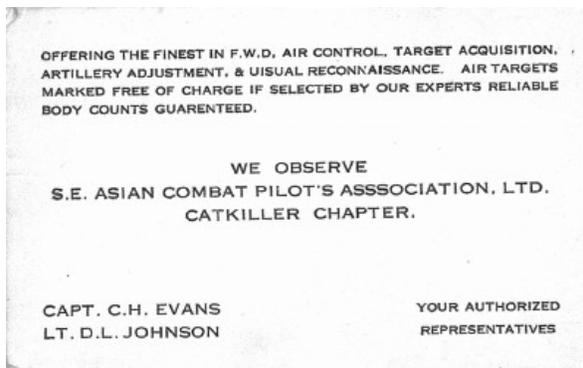




ARMY'S 'CATKILLER' PILOTS— TAKING PAGE FROM OLD WEST

Observer Staff Writer

PHU BAI—The Army pilot, pistol slung low on his hip, might have been taking his cue from PALADIN, knight-errant of American television's Wild West. The card he handed his prospective passenger, however, did not read "Have Gun, Will Travel." Instead, it offered "the finest in forward air control, target acquisition, artillery adjustment..." and a host of other services including the fact "reliable body counts are guaranteed."



This combat ready aviator is a member of the "Southeast Asian Combat Pilots Association," better known in this area as "Catkillers." Like the pilot of this tiny plane – a two seat Birdog – the passenger is a trained observer, who will assist the pilot in spotting the elusive Viet Cong in the jungle canopied plains or the rugged mountains of "Charlie's country." This spotter plane, unlike those of World War II or Korea, is ready for trouble. Should an over-zealous communist start peppering it with rifle fire, plane and pilot are ready. The plane has an armored-plated skin [*Yeah, right!!*] and is equipped with rocket launchers to mark Viet Cong positions for air strikes. When the "Catkillers" are scouring the mountain areas they work in pairs. One plane scoots along at altitudes ranging from treetop level to more than 1000 feet. Its "buddy" stays higher, ready to swoop down if needed or to call for assistance from the nearest base.





The slow flying Birddogs normally make an inviting target for the sharpshooting communist in the jungles and mountains. But the skilled “Catkiller” pilots twist, turn and sometimes, almost stand the versatile little “bird” on its nose to minimize the danger of being hit. But they do take hits once in a while. One of the “Catkiller” platoons has averaged five hits for each of its seven Birddogs. “That’s a pretty good average, considering that for every hit we take, there an average of 300 misses,” commented one pilot.

Just who are these “Catkillers” and where did they come from? No one seems to know where the name came from, but the American, Free World and allied ground forces around Hue, Quang Ngai, and Da Nang know who they are. Whenever the “ground bound” units need someone to adjust artillery fire or spot an air strike, they call the “Catkillers,” the pilots of the 220th Aviation Company. They buckle on pistol belts, don their helmets, hop into their “birds” and are off on their mission as the 20th Century PALADINS, doing their bit to rid Vietnam of the Viet Cong scourge.



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