

Methinks the Air Force Protesteth Too Much

EXTENSION OF REMARKS

OF

HON. OTIS G. PIKE

OF NEW YORK

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, April 19, 1966

Mr. PIKE. Mr. Speaker, in two consecutive issues of the Air Force and Space Digest, a magazine published by the Air Force Association, there have been critical articles entitled: "Pike Subcommittee Report on Tactical Air," and "An Open Letter to Congressman Otis G. Pike."

Since they spelled my name right, perhaps I should just let them keep sniping on a monthly basis, but since the name stands almost alone as something they got right, a few further comments may be in order.

The alleged motivation for this little vendetta is a report made by a special subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee entitled "Close Air Support." The subcommittee was appointed on August 17, 1965, by Chairman L. MENDEL RIVERS of the House Armed Services Committee and consisted of nine members: RICHARD H. ICHORD, of Missouri; LUCIEN N. NEZEL, of Michigan; G. ELLIOTT HAGAN, of Georgia; DONALD J. IRWIN, of Connecticut; FRANK E. EVANS, of Colorado; BOB WILSON, of California; CHARLES GUBSER, of California; CHARLES CHAMBERLAIN, of Michigan; and myself as chairman.

Hearings were held in Washington in September and October. Witnesses included Army Special Forces personnel who had seen a great deal of ground combat in Vietnam; Air Force, Marine, and Navy pilots who had flown hundreds of missions in Vietnam; and Army, Air Force, and Defense Department witnesses on the policymaking level in Washington.

The report was filed with Chairman RIVERS on January 27, 1966. It was unanimous. It was critical of both the Air Force and the Army in certain respects. If the Army resented the criticism they shrugged it off. We seem to have struck a nerve with the Air Force brass, however, for they have been screaming more like sick sea gulls than wounded eagles ever since. If it were not for the lives at stake it might be mildly amusing. As it is, the attempt to make a great success out of what has been a slighted, downgraded, underfinanced close air support role in the Air Force is not only pathetic, it is dangerous.

On Friday, February 25, 1966, the Secretary of the Air Force praised the Air Force's close air support performance in a speech to the Executives Club of Chi-

cago. As reported in the Aviation Daily of February 23, the Secretary said:

Our equipment for close air support, I believe, is the best in the world.

The article listed just four aircraft: the A-1E, the A-7, the COIN, and the F-4.

Not one of those aircraft is a plane developed by the Air Force. Three were developed by the Navy, the fourth by the Marines.

Of the four tactical aircraft requested in the supplemental authorization for the Vietnam war by the Air Force this year, not one was developed by the Air Force; two were Navy planes, one a Marine plane, the fourth privately developed and used by the CIA.

It must be galling to the Air Force to find itself so ill-equipped for close air support in a guerrilla environment that it had to get planes from the Army—O-1 spotter planes—the Navy, and the Marines in order to do its job of close air support in Vietnam. Such has been the fact, however, and the Air Force does itself and the Nation a disservice by trying to conceal the fact.

The official organ of the Air Force Association has gone even further. Before attacking the subcommittee's report they rewrote it to suit their own purposes. The committee's report was limited to the quality of the close air support provided our own troops and our Vietnamese allies. The title of the report was "Close Air Support." It was printed on the cover in large letters. The Air Force Digest made it "Pike Subcommittee Report on Tactical Air." This enabled them to talk about a lot of other things. Usually erroneously.

In the March issue Mr. Witze, the senior editor, tells how the subcommittee visited Vietnam after the hearings were over, and were told by the Army generals how thankful they were for the support they got from the Air Force. Fact: This subcommittee never went to Vietnam. Mr. Witze points out in a magnificently garbled paragraph that there have been political restraints in Vietnam and says that when he landed at Tan Son Nhut airport in mid-1964, "the RF-101's were lined up on the ramp ready to go." Go where and do what? I suspect that the senior editor really knows that RF-101's take pictures, they do not provide close air support.

In the April issue the Air Force Digest contains a story by Sam Butz, giving the Air Force's version of a part of an operation known as Harvest Moon. The story features a picture of Mr. Butz riding in the back seat of an O-1 Bird Dog. This is the plane which the Air Force had to get from the Army. After they got them they painted teeth on them and took Mr. Butz flying around Vietnam. Either they fly better or frighten the Vietcong more with teeth painted on them. In the turgid prose of the Air Force Digest this is described as distinctive marking.

The article, which is in the form of a letter to me, is a supposed testimonial to the proposition that the Air Force system of close air support is better than the

Marine Corps system. It contains such delightful pieces of self-praise as this:

As they came over a ridge they saw a group of about 100 ARVN troops, led by a U.S. adviser, running up a hill. Behind them on the trail were at least 150 VC. One FAC (that's the Air Force man in the Army plane—forward aid controller) swung down and fired his AR-15 automatic rifle at the leading VC group, killing two of them.

Comment: Sure he did.

The other called in an AC-47, one of the old C-47 transports recently equipped with three rapid firing Gatling guns.

Comment: This latest addition to the Air Force's inventory of close air support aircraft was first flown in 1935.

However, it has not been possible for a reporter to get any realistic discussion of the operation from official sources in Vietnam.

Comment: Obviously.

It is too bad that the Air Force is so sensitive on this subject. They use the argument that I am prejudiced because 20 years ago I flew with the Marines. The argument loses much of its persuasiveness, however, when used only by people who make their living by buttering up the Air Force. The happy fact is that our close air support in Vietnam is better than it was. By borrowing planes from the other services, and by using Air Force planes for purposes and missions for which they were never intended, and through the unlimited courage, dedication, and skill of American pilots, the job is being done.

The sad fact is, Mr. Speaker, that the report was and is correct. The Air Force has concentrated on missiles, bombers, and interceptors. It has never developed one plane for the primary purpose of providing close support for the foot soldiers on the ground. It is not the fault of the Air Force pilots in Vietnam. With the equipment they have been provided they have done wonders. It is the fault of the same high level Air Force policymakers who still feel obliged to deny that they have ever ignored the vital close air support mission. They count the number of missions flown, and the tons of bombs dropped, and the number of medals awarded, and never, ever, admit that if the ton of bomb which we've dropped for each Vietcong had hit the Vietcong, the Vietcong would have been long gone. As long as they keep their heads buried in the sand, they will continue to present most attractive targets.