



(The Gazette, Kevin Kreck)

In a longstanding tradition, Jim Stanford, a Vietnam veteran, christened the new Forward Air Controllers Memorial with scotch in Memorial Park on Friday.

Monument dedicated to unarmed scout pilots in Vietnam War

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THE GAZETTE

A monument in Memorial Park dedicated Friday recognizes men who flew into combat at the controls of small, unarmed planes.

Most of the forward air controllers, who directed bombs onto targets in the Vietnam War lurked in light propeller-driven planes at tree-top level over the jungles of Southeast Asia armed with little more than smoke rockets that could show their jet-driving brethren where to aim.

And 35 years after the end of that war, most of them still recall the dangerous missions with a fondness.

"We loved it," said Greg Wilson of Arizona, a member of the Forward Air Controllers Association and Vietnam veteran who came to Colorado Springs to see the monument to comrades who died in the war.

The forward air controllers' job has been filled by robotic drones and airmen who take high-tech gear onto the battlefield to identify targets.

"To have a low and slow (air controller) on duty today doesn't make sense," said retired Air Force Col. Jay Barnes, who flew a Cessna over Vietnam battlefields.

But in Vietnam and neighboring nations in the 1960s and early '70s, they were a lifeline for troops who could use them to direct devastating firepower against enemy forces.

Because the air controllers could call down bombers, they were targets for communist forces. The airmen in the small planes often faced thick fire, and too frequently were shot down. The fire got worse as the war went on and the Air Force put air controllers in fast-moving F-100 jets when the surface-to-air missile threat became too great for the plodding propeller planes.

The F-100s got shot down, too.

"We didn't think about it," said Barnes of Pittsburgh. "We thought we were immortal."

They weren't.

During the long conflict 288 forward air controllers, observers and support crewmen died.

"They were the cream of America's youth," said retired Air Force Col. George "Bud" Day, a forward air controller from Florida who won the nation's highest medal for valor for his conduct after his F-100 was shot down over North Vietnam in 1967.

Day, who was tortured during a long imprisonment in North Vietnam, paused to honor the heroism and sacrifice of his enemies.

"All of them have mothers, brothers, sisters and children," Day said.

The air controllers said they hope people in Colorado Springs will visit the monument and look at the 288 names of fallen comrades etched in stone.

"Those names on that wall are the price of freedom," said forward air controller Darrel Whitcomb of Virginia as he thought about friends who never made it home.

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