

WINGS OF GOLD

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To Ride A Black Pony

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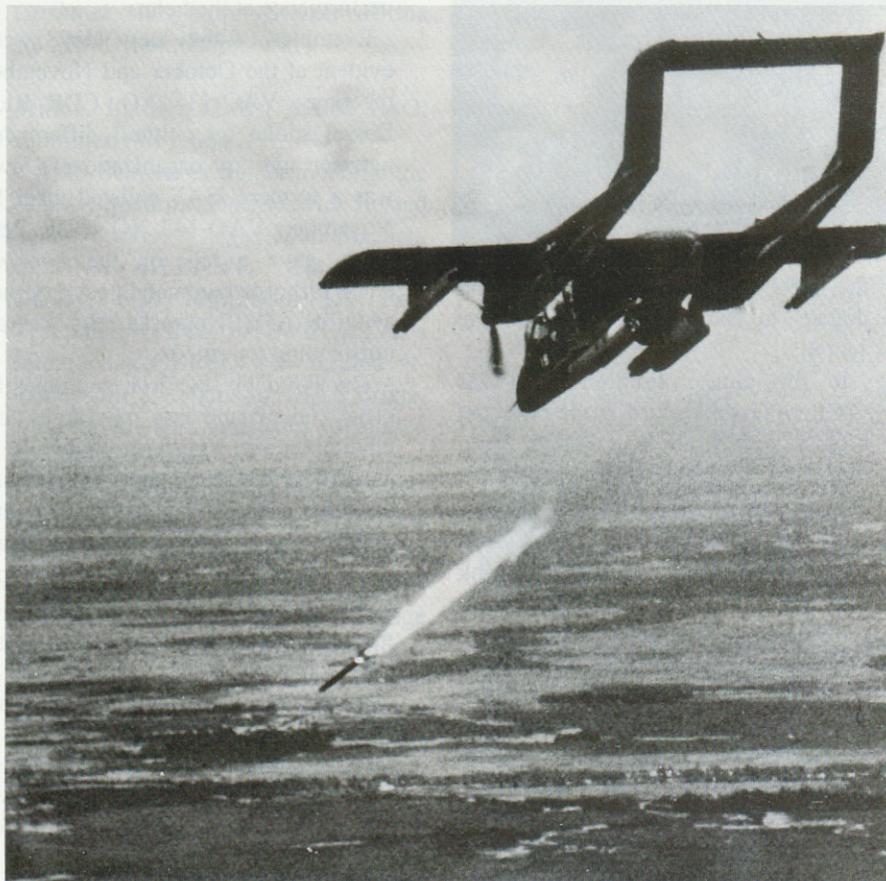
The Vietnam War produced many innovations in Naval warfare not the least of which were the riverine forces created to interdict the waterborne flow of men and war material to insurgents in South Vietnam. They also countered the burgeoning threat from the Vietcong which operated along the labyrinth of tributaries and canals in the Mekong Delta with seeming impunity. The men who manned the river patrol boats (PBRs) were a tough, dedicated bunch of stalwarts who slugged it out face-to-face with an illusive and cunning enemy in a treacherous environment. It was a rugged kind of warfare with many casualties. Often the patrol boats would be ambushed in tight quarters where there was precious little room to maneuver or turn around and backtrack. Sometimes they came upon large enemy concentrations and required immediate help just to survive.

A special helicopter squadron was formed to give the riverine forces fire support from the air. Helicopter Attack (Light) Squadron Three (HAL-3), known as the *Seawolves*, flying UH-1 *Hueys* did a terrific job of providing this support, and their activities are the stuff of legends.

But something more was needed to bridge a gap between high performance jet attack aircraft and the slower and more vulnerable Hueys, fixed wing aircraft that could bring heavier ordnance to bear and do it with the kind of speed and precision required when return fire was heavy and the distance between good guys and bad guys was calculated in yards.

I had just returned to North Island from a deployment on Yankee Station with VS-23 aboard USS *Yorktown* (CVS-10) when it was announced the air group was being disestablished and that there was a call for volunteers to form a light attack squadron to provide air cover for riverine forces in Vietnam. At a hastily called, all-pilots meeting a yellow pad was circulated for those interested to sign up.

As it turned out there was



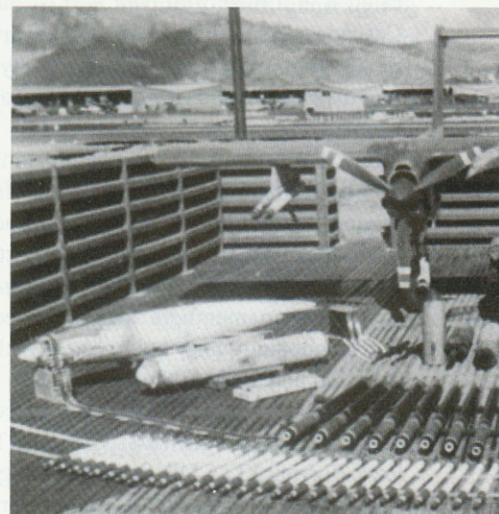
Black Pony fires Zuni rocket at enemy target.

considerable interest which I thought somewhat surprising from a group that had just completed a long arduous deployment. It would mean another long separation for families and, if one surmised correctly, some considerable combat risks. Then too, it was not

considered a good career move to break with one aviation community to join another and since this new squadron was apparently to be one of a kind it was not entirely clear to which community it would belong. On the other hand, it was an



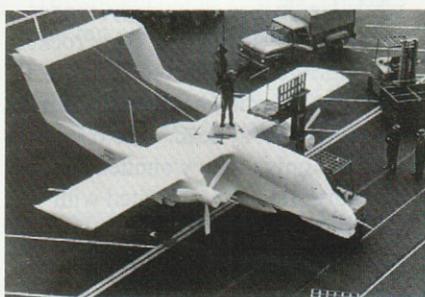
VAL-4 was established in January 1969, shipped to Vietnam in March, and was up and operating by April.



opportunity to do what every Naval Aviator is trained for, to test his skills, to make a meaningful contribution to the war effort, to get into the thick of it. The list was held for a day so that deeper consideration could be given and families consulted. Only one name was removed from that list but others were added.

The Squadron was to be designated Light Attack Squadron FOUR (VAL-4) and the name selected was the *Black Ponies*. Since the Navy had no suitable aircraft for the mission envisioned, 18 twin-turboprop OV-10A *Broncos* were borrowed from the Marine Corps and four (A-1) *Skyraider (Spad)* pilots were trained by the Marines to act as instructors. Four of the aircraft would be left behind to train replacement pilots. VS-41, the readiness squadron for West Coast carrier fixed wing antisubmarine replacements, became the host for the formation of VAL-4 and the continued training of *Black Pony* pilots.

When *Yorktown's* VS squadrons were disestablished the volunteer officers walked to the other side of the hangar and checked into VS-41. The office spaces of the squadrons were



preserved for the new one about to be established.

The cadre of four trained pilots put the rest of us through an intensified program which was modified from the one the Marines used and included transition aerobatics, instruments and formation. A new weapons training program was developed for the unique light attack mission of the *Black Ponies*. A deployment to MCAS Yuma, Arizona for some realistic weapons delivery practice brought everything together. VAL-4 was established at North Island on January 3, 1969, shipped to Vietnam in March, and was up and operating by April.

The squadron was split in two with Det A flying from the Vietnamese AFB at Binh Thuy to provide air cover for the southern (4 Corps) riverine forces. I was assigned to Det B at the U.S. Army airfield, Vung Tau, and later became its OinC. We covered the area around Saigon and provided air cover for the riverine forces of 3 Corps. Each detachment had five or six aircraft with the remainder of the squadron's planes in for scheduled maintenance or unscheduled repairs.

At Vung Tau, there were revetments for the aircraft and marston matting for runway and taxi-ways. We soon found that blowing sand was not especially good for the planes but something as simple as planting ice plant eventually solved the problem.

Coping with the tactical problem was, to a great degree, a learn-as-you-go evolution. We operated in Light Attack Fire Teams called LAFTs, the

pilot of the lead plane being the fire team leader. Each plane carried two pilots. The pilot in command, usually a second tour aviator, flew in the front seat, made all weapons selections and did the firing while the back seater took care of navigation, which was all contact, and communications, which involved obtaining clearance to attack a target and, perhaps most important, precisely defining who was the enemy and who were the friendlies. It was not unusual for a friendly on the ground to call in fire in a barely audible voice because the enemy was so close.

The *Bronco's* weapons system was generally well suited to the job at hand. Each plane carried 12 five-inch *Zuni* high velocity aircraft rockets on four stations, two on each wing station and two pods of four each, underneath. There were three firing options available. The proximity or VT fuzing detonated the high explosive head at tree top level and was most effective against enemy troops in the open. The contact fuze detonated the HE when it hit something and was pretty impressive to watch close up. The third type of fuzing was delayed and was referred to as a bunker buster because the head would detonate below the surface.

The *Bronco* also had four Mark 60, .30 caliber machine guns mounted internally. They were mostly used to keep enemy heads down while delivering heavier ordnance. The lead plane typically carried a Mark 4, 20mm gun pod which was very effective - when it worked.

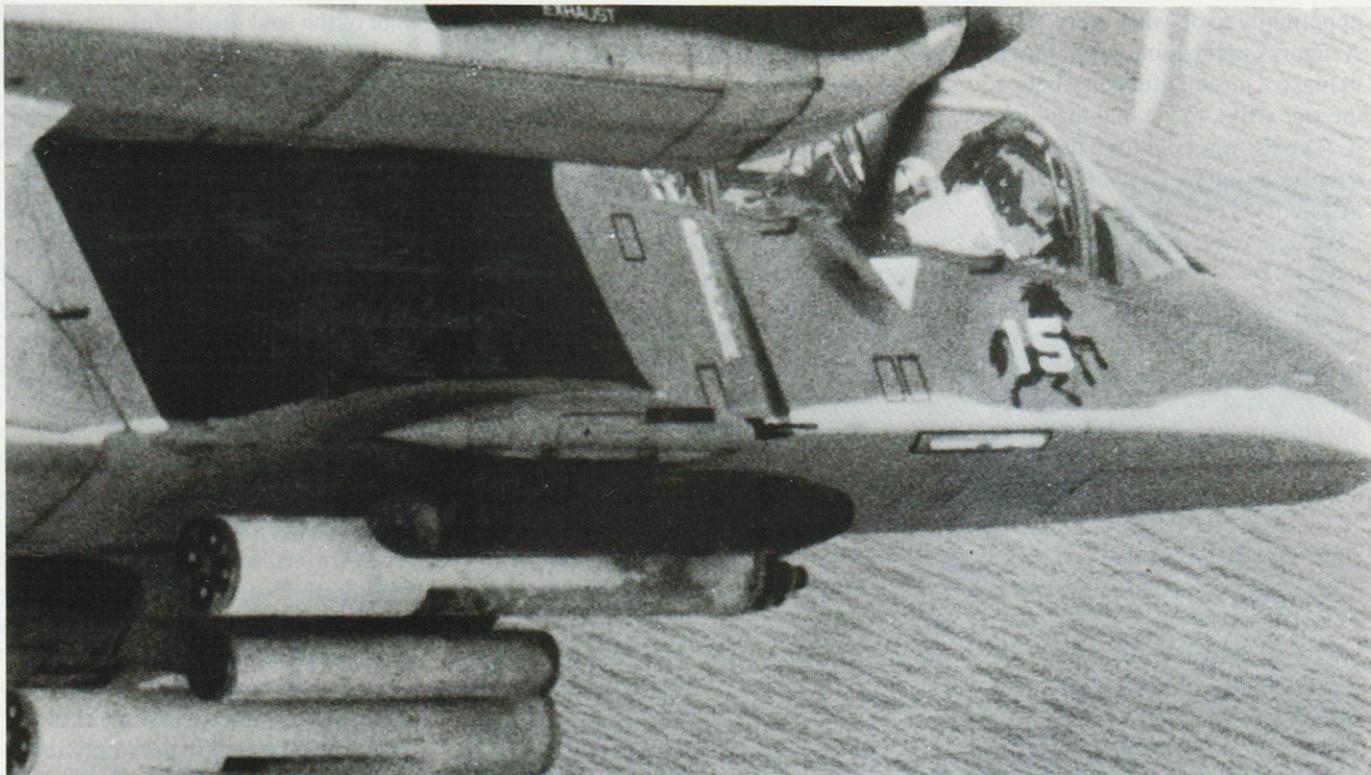
Unfortunately, it was prone to overheating and jamming and was therefore limited to short bursts. We also had a seven or 19-shot pod of folding fin, 2.75 aircraft rockets which were useful but not as accurate as the Zunis.

The wingman usually had the same Zuni mix, internal machine guns and 2.75 rockets, but instead of the heavy Mark 4 gun pod, his plane packed a relatively light SUU-11 mini-gun which fired 7,000 rounds of 7.62 mm per minute. With tracers, it looked like a steady stream of red from plane to ground and was an impressive sight at night. The incoming fire must have been especially unnerving to the



Cocooned OV-10 arrives for duty in Vietnam, top. Above, Ordnancemen load Zunis into pods. Left, VAL-4 *Broncos* had multi-weapon capability.





Bronco banking left.

enemy forces at which it was directed.

A pod of flares was carried by each plane to provide illumination for night strikes. The flares were aft-released and parachute-retarded. As the ordnance was all forward-firing from low altitude, precision accuracy was not only possible but, indeed, mandatory.

VAL-4 flew four basic mission types. First, there was the scramble alert where four pilots and two armed aircraft could be airborne within minutes of a call from units in contact with the enemy. Average time from notification to launch was six minutes. Sector clearance to fire in the contact zone was obtained when airborne. Second, there were LAFTs flying a pre-planned route at night, checking in with each Naval operations center along the way to see where they might be needed. It proved an awesome deterrent to infiltration. A third type of mission was air cover for special operations. An external fuel tank extended the "on top" time from three to four and a half hours. The fourth mission was unique in that it was the only single plane flight and carried a USMC spotter. It operated in what was known as the Rung Sat special zone, an area where the Vietcong was

particularly strong and through which ran the main shipping channel to Saigon. There was considerable concern the enemy might sink a ship in the channel with mines or rockets and block essential traffic to the South Vietnamese capital.

At the first sign of enemy activity the single *Bronco* notified the base which scrambled the alert team. The single aircraft then marked the targets with smoke rockets.

A tour with the *Black Ponies* provided ample opportunity for what some might call high adventure. I vividly recall being called out on one dark night in August 1969, a night with all the elements for disaster, torrential rain, thunder, lightning and extremely poor visibility which was, at times, less than a mile. The *Seawolves* were unable to respond because of the severity of the weather.

I was the Fire Team Leader and my wingman was LCDR John A. Butterfield. We had been summoned to help a South Vietnamese outpost in Tay Ninh Province that was in imminent danger of being wiped out by a large North Vietnamese unit. Our LAFT was on top of the targets within minutes of takeoff and the friendlies were instructed to mark

their positions with flares and marking rounds.

The enemy, which was often as close as 50 meters to friendly forces, stubbornly continued their attack while we, just as stubbornly, made repeated low-level runs firing rockets and mini-guns. In the end, the North Vietnamese unit was forced to retreat, leaving some 45 dead. The friendlies suffered only a few wounded and we were gratified to be credited with saving the outpost from being overrun. It was the kind of mission repeated often by *Black Pony* aircraft during their stay in country.

Ironically, the first squadron fatality was the pilot with the most previous combat experience. In fact, he was credited with downing a MiG while flying an A-1 *Spad* on a previous tour.

On a firing run the minimum pullout altitude was reached and the aircraft kept diving for the ground. The pilot in the back seat pulled back on the stick and managed to prevent the aircraft from augering into the ground.

Returning to base the aircraft commander, Lieutenant Peter Russell, was found dead in the straps; a single bullet had passed through the canopy, killing him. He would not be the last.

Despite the frustration and tragedies



Broncos often flew in section formation on combat missions. Note loaded Zuni pods underneath.

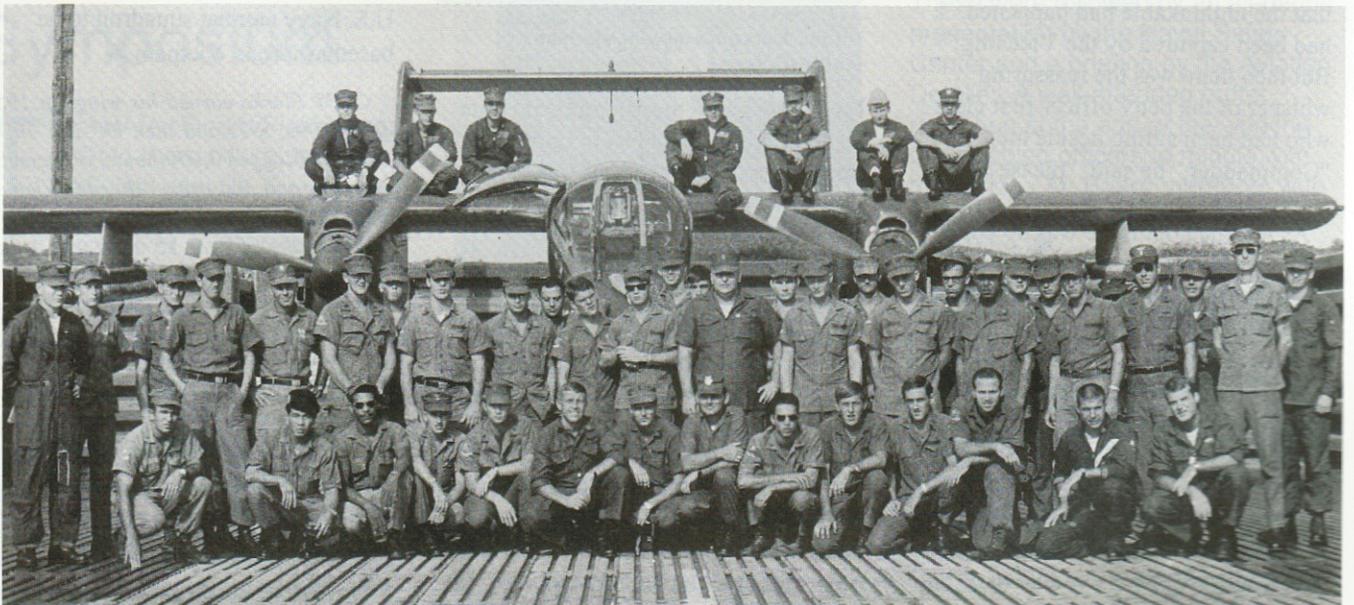
of war, there was friendship, camaraderie and even a few humorous episodes. In order to ensure that all the friendly players were aware of each other's capabilities we tried "cross-polinization." *Bronco* pilots went out on the patrol boats with the brown-water types and vice versa. I knew the O-in-C of the local SEAL team and offered to trade a *Bronco*

ride if he would take me on an insertion into enemy territory. He flew in the back seat on one of our routine patrols and I went with him on a foray into the Rung Sat Zone.

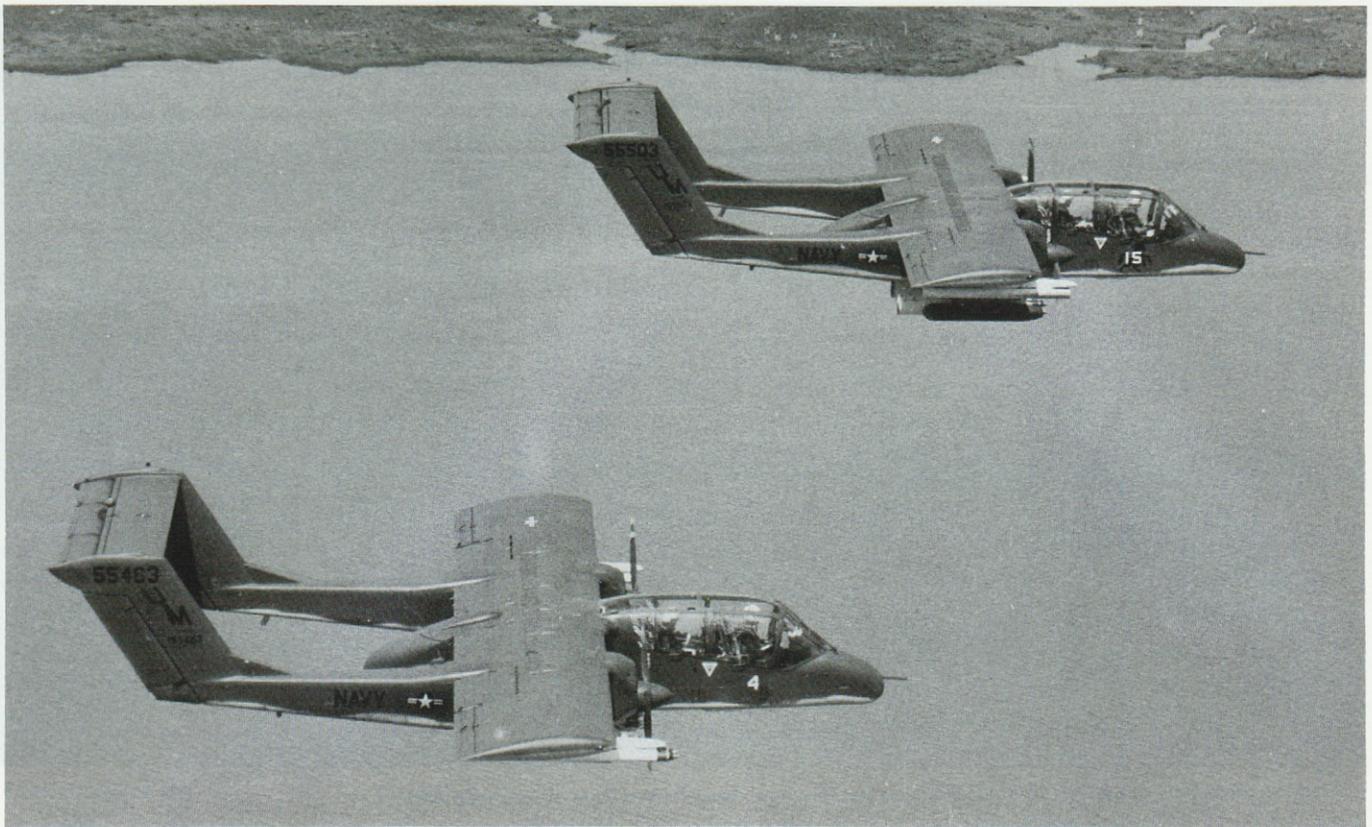
We briefed, blackened our faces and hands, checked our weapons, donned flack jackets and headed out. I felt like John Wayne but was well aware this was for real.

An inflatable boat dropped us off at strategic locations, our group being deposited at the confluence of two small rivers. Insertion was at dusk with pickup scheduled for dawn. Our mission was to interrupt enemy supply efforts by ambush and to take live, talking prisoners if possible.

We were briefed to be very quiet so we sat perfectly still on the wet,



VAL-4 personnel took a break from the action to pose for this group photo.



Black Ponies en route to target.

marshy ground waiting for the fire-fight I was sure would come. I'll never know what it was that crawled up my leg that night but because of the need for absolute silence I could neither swat it or shoo it away. After several hours of waiting I must have dozed off.

I was rudely awakened by a hand clamped over my mouth and I knew that the unthinkable had happened. I had been captured by the Vietcong. But then there was the reassuring whisper of the petty officer first class who had been sitting beside me. "Commander," he said, "please don't snore. It's too noisy."

As it turned out there was no contact with the enemy that night and I was happy to return to my bunker at Vung Tau and the relative safety of my aircraft.

Our enemy was wily and knew how to use the border between Vietnam and Cambodia to provide a sanctuary from U.S. and South Vietnamese forces. We were repeatedly warned in briefings that it was taboo to fly into Cambodian airspace and that to do so involved serious consequences, perhaps even court martial. One night



Author Florko on duty in Vietnam with VAL-4.

I was faced with the dilemma of either disregarding the restriction or of refusing to go to the aid of U.S. Navy patrol boats which were taking heavy fire from the Cambodian side of a canal. The latter course was unthinkable so I oriented our runs at such an angle that allowed us to fire into Cambodia and then make a last minute steep turn so as not to actually fly over Cambodian territory. The *Bronco* was light enough and slow enough to make that possible. As might be expected a diplomatic complaint was filed and I was on the carpet for creating an international incident. Fortunately, I was backed to the hilt by the squadron C.O. and the

chain of command and as far as I know, nothing more ever came of it.

I rotated back to the U.S. in January 1970 but the *Black Ponies* continued their unique contribution to the war. Several fine *Black Pony* aviators died in that effort. All hands did their jobs and did them well. VAL-4 was withdrawn on 1 April 1972, the last U.S. Navy combat squadron to be based ashore in Vietnam. ■

CAPT Florko earned his wings in 1957, flew P5Ms, S-2s and then OV-10s. In his career he logged 3,000 hours, 300 combat missions and 300 traps. After his Vietnam tour he was Ops Officer in VS-41, which was then the FRS for VS and Light Attack. A graduate of the Naval Post Graduate School, he also was CO of Naval Recruiting District, Albany, NY, OinC of the NAS Annex in Bermuda, and CO of Recruiting District Chicago. He retired from the Navy in 1980. Then, for 10 years, he headed the NJROTC Program at Dunedin High School in Florida, where he now resides.

The Black Ponies will celebrate their 30th Anniversary with a reunion, October 8-11, 1999 at the Sheraton National Hotel in Arlington, Virginia. Their web site address is: www.blackpony.org