

By Hal Andrews

## OE/O-1 Bird Dog



In late 1949 and early 1950, the Navy's "Revolt of the Admirals" had just ended (see Sep–Oct 98, p. 31) and the Korean War had just begun. Public aviation attention was focused on new jet fighters, research aircraft and supersonic flight, as well as new helicopters. The post-WW II heyday of private flying had ended, and Cessna, with its range of high-wing, all-metal models, was one of the few surviving light plane manufacturers.

Largely unnoticed among higher profile events, a competition for a new all-metal, light, two-place Army liaison airplane was being conducted jointly by the Army and Air Force. The competition featured a prototype fly-off in spring 1950 which included both Air Force technical and Army operational user evaluations. Cessna beat the other light aircraft manufacturers who entered prototypes and received a contract for 418 L-19As in June 1950 as Korean combat started. Using components from Cessna's civilian models and adapting such company special features as single-piece spring-steel landing gear, the

redesigned fuselage incorporated an extended-vision cabin for pilot and observer in tandem. A single rack for a rocket or small bomb could be mounted under each wing outboard of the wing strut attachment.

By December, Marine observation squadron VM0-6 with its mixed complement of helicopters and OY *Sentinels* (see Jan–Feb 99, p. 30) was working with ground Marine units in Korean combat, and the first production L-19 *Bird Dogs* were entering

similar service in support of Army ground troops. Just as the Marines had favorably assessed the WW II Army "Grasshoppers" and obtained L-5s from Army production as OYs, the Marines selected the Army L-19s in 1951 to replace aging OYs, and subsequently procured a total of 60 as OE-1s.

An additional 25 were ordered in 1952. However, OE-1 operations showed performance limitations, particularly at elevated terrain levels.





OE-1



OE-1

## OE-1

Wingspan:	36'
Length:	25'9"
Height:	7'6"
Engine:	Continental O-470-11 213 hp
Takeoff weight:	2,430 lbs
Max speed:	146 mph
Service ceiling:	21,300 ft
Range:	590 nm
Crew:	2
Armament:	4 2.75" smoke rockets

The helo was also particularly vulnerable to ground fire. To correct these problems, an upgraded model included crew armor protection, increased wing rocket or bomb carriage capability and a supercharged engine. Again, Cessna used wings and tail surfaces from commercial production designs for the new OE-2. Correction of engine installation deficiencies and extended flight testing delayed deliveries until after the 1953 Korean armistice, and there was no further OE-2 production.

For the rest of the 1950s, the three VMO squadrons operated mixed inventories of OE-1s and -2s, with helicopters taking over more of the "low and slow" support functions both in the U.S. and the western Pacific area. Carrier operations were authorized and individual OEs operated from a number of carriers as Marines explored various approaches



O-1C (Vietnam)

to expeditionary operations. A few OE-1s were procured either for the Marines or for foreign air forces as military assistance, but the Army handled almost all further *Bird Dog* procurement. While OE peacetime attrition was low, the operating inventory continued to decrease.

Airplane enthusiasts generally remember 1962 as the year that the Department of Defense established joint service designations for all military aircraft. Both Army L-19s and Marine OEs were folded into the new O-1 model, and OE-1s and OE-2s became O-1Bs and O-1Cs,

respectively. For the Marines and their remaining OEs, two 1962 events were significant. A Marine helicopter transport squadron, with a few *Bird Dogs* for liaison duties, was deployed to Vietnam as part of the U.S. military assistance program for the South Vietnamese. Back home, a new turboshaft engine-powered Bell helicopter, to be delivered as the UH-1E, was ordered. It would take over the O-1's VMO roles as part of its mission. Like the OE-1 originally, it was adapted from Army production.

As U.S. military involvement in Vietnam expanded, especially as it became a full-fledged war beginning in 1964, O-1 activities were adapted to the widespread warfare. Army and Air Force units found their O-1s to be ideal forward air controller (FAC) aircraft supporting ground force combat, particularly in limited arms jungle fighting, and the South

Vietnam air force used its O-1s similarly. FACs would spot and mark targets with the O-1s' smoke rockets for destruction by attack aircraft. Initially, the Marines preferred to use their VMO squadron helicopters for this purpose, but by 1967 the effectiveness of the O-1s for Marine ground fire support was recognized and VMO-6 began using O-1Cs in combat. Eight O-1Gs (Army O-1As modified for FAC use) were obtained to augment the remaining O-1Cs.

As the ground war intensified with more effective North Vietnamese weapons, the need for attack-capable FAC aircraft was met with armed UH-1Es and new joint service short-takeoff-and-landing OV-10s. Marine O-1 combat losses were not replaced, and by 1969 O-1s were being withdrawn from Vietnam. The last Marine *Bird Dogs* were transferred to Futenma, Okinawa, and retired there in 1970.

Later, one special flight closed out Naval Aviation's ties to the O-1. In 1975, as U.S. personnel were being evacuated from Saigon to carriers offshore, a South Vietnamese pilot loaded his family of six into a Vietnamese *Bird Dog* and flew out toward the carriers receiving helicopter-delivered evacuees. Spotting *Midway* (CV 41) and getting a cleared flight deck, they landed safely. Their airplane is now on display at the National Museum of Naval Aviation, Pensacola, Fla., to recognize the unusual event.

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