

Even when the FAC properly marked the target and briefed the attacking aircraft, errors could still occur. One of a flight of three Vietnamese F-5s dropped two BLU-1B napalm bombs on an element of a US infantry division in contact with Vietcong forces in Binh Dinh Province in 1968. Two US soldiers were killed and eighteen were seriously wounded. An investigation of the incident revealed that, while the US FAC and the VNAF flight leader understood each other, the Vietnamese pilot of the offending aircraft did not understand the FAC's instructions, consequently did not know the exact location of friendly ground troops, and could not visually identify them from the air because of smoke and haze in the target area.

On another occasion two F-100s were flying an immediate air strike in support of two companies of a US infantry division in close and heavy contact with the enemy. The strike was controlled by a USAF FAC, and each F-100 successfully delivered four bombs on target, 250 meters northeast of a reference point, in this case burning napalm from a previous strike. As the ground battle became more intense the ground commander requested strafing runs along the western edge of the burning napalm. The two F-100s made two strafing passes each about sixty-five meters from friendly positions. Darkness was approaching and one pilot became disoriented on his last strafing pass, fired short, and hit the friendly position, killing two men and wounding seven. In a similar incident the pilot of an F-100 dropped a Cluster Bomb Unit (CBU) about 1,000 meters southeast of the target correctly marked by the FAC. Two US soldiers were wounded. It was later determined that the pilot momentarily lost sight of the target while reversing his direction of flight after the first pass and lined up for his second run on smoke laid down by a helicopter rather than on the FAC's marker.

Because of their explosive characteristics Cluster Bomb Units (CBUs) were especially hazardous when used near friendly troops. When their use was coupled with faulty coordination the results were disastrous. Twenty-three friendly troops were wounded in 1968 when an airborne FAC failed to clear a target area properly and permitted an F-100 pilot to dump two CBU-2As in what the FAC presumed to be the authorized jettison area.

Aerial rockets could be equally dangerous to friendly troops. In August 1968 a Navy A-7D fired two 5-inch aerial rockets into the HQ CP of Company D, 2d Battalion, 327th Infantry (101st Airborne Division), during an operation in the A Shau Valley. Fifty-five casualties resulted. The entire operation was plagued with amicide incidents of

various types, and one participant estimates that the US brigade involved lost far more men to friendly fire than to enemy action in this operation.

On a few occasions, close proximity of friendly and enemy troops, lack of adequate marking of friendly positions, and pilot inexperience combined to cause incidents of amicide. Two F-100s armed with MK-82 High Drag General Purpose bombs conducted a preplanned strike on a North Vietnamese Army (NVA) headquarters in support of a US infantry division in 1968. The main friendly element marked its position with smoke, but the forward elements closest to the target did not, for fear of disclosing their location to the enemy. The FAC gave the fighters a verbal description of the friendly positions, and the lead attack pilot successfully hit the target with all four of his bombs in three passes. The second pilot accurately dropped two bombs, but on his third pass one bomb fell 1,200 to 1,300 meters short, killing one US soldier and wounding four others of the forward friendly element. The primary cause of the incident was determined to have been the accidental thumbing of the bomb release button on the stick grip by the pilot while he was trying to trim the aircraft with the stick trimmer button.

Occasionally the tactical situation in Vietnam demanded the air-delivery of ordnance so close to friendly positions that some friendly casualties could not be avoided. Four US Marines were killed and two were wounded in a 1968 operation south of Hue when fragments from a properly placed bomb scattered into friendly lines. Two companies of Marines were in very heavy contact with NVA forces and were provided air support by two Marine A-4s under the control of a USAF FAC. The FAC correctly determined that the ground tactical situation warranted hazardously close support. The aircraft in fact made three such passes with all weapons on target. The bombs dropped on the fourth pass were also on target, but fragments hit friendly troops.

The armed helicopter, used extensively for the first time during the Vietnam conflict, offered significant advantages in mobility and accurate firepower, but it also had several peculiar characteristics that contributed to incidents of air amicide. Many amicide incidents involving helicopters resulted from the causative factors commonly associated with fixed wing aircraft. Helicopter pilots as well as fixed wing fighter and bomber pilots were capable of mistaking friendly ground troops for the enemy. In early 1968 helicopter gunships of the 187th Assault Helicopter Company, operating in War Zone C, engaged a company-size force west-northwest of Go Da Hau. The personnel on the ground were unidentified, and a