

Ranch - Hand Pilots Fight Unique War

By Lt. Ronald G. Marlar

Hq 2AD Tan Son Nhut Afd, RVN — In the air, throbbing aircraft engines shatter the early morning calm over a dense jungle in the Republic of Vietnam. On the ground, Viet Cong troops scurry for cover and man their weapons. The stage is set for one of the most unique conflicts between the U.S. Air Force and the Viet Cong guerilla.

Four C-123 Providers, twin-engine assault transports, swoop in at tree-top level. The specially-equipped, Ranch Hand aircraft ("Ranch Hand" is the official nickname of the 309th Air Commando Squadron Special Aerial Spray Flight) release a thick cloud of white spray over their jungle target. Flying in a tight formation, the spray planes cover a swath more than 1,000 feet wide with a defoliating fluid.

As the propeller-driven craft lumber over the target, the Viet Cong open up with a withering blast of machinegun fire.

"Lead this is number two, I have taken several hits," reports the pilot of the second aircraft. "They seem to be coming from the treeline on our left. Yes, there they go again. See the flashes!"

"Roger, I see them," replies the lead pilot. "I'll call in the VNAF fighters. Check your damage and watch for fuel leaks."

Again the second pilot's voice, "Sergeant! Hey, Sergeant Evans (TSgt. Ralph Evans,) are you still with us back there?"

"Yes sir, we're okay. Got some smoke, but it's thinning out."

"Lead this is number two again. We're still flying. No real damage."

Meanwhile, four Republic of Vietnam Air Force A-1E Skyraiders, supporting the spray flight, rake the Viet Cong positions with 20 millimeter cannon fire.

"The fighters made our second and third passes a little smoother," says Maj. Lormier (Larry) W. Hay-Chapman, Ranch Hand commander, but we still picked up a few more hits."

The aerial spray flight began as an experiment in December 1961. At that time, six Fairchild C-123s were deployed to Southeast Asia. Their mission; service a U.S. Army requirement to defoliate selected strategic jungle areas in the Republic of Vietnam.

Major Hay-Chapman, unit commander since 1964, says, "We spray a variety of targets to deny the VC a hiding place from air strikes and preclude ambushes on the ground. Most of our targets are along canals, highways and railroads," he says.

Flying over 100 sorties a month, the Ranch Hand crews fly throughout the Republic of Vietnam. The 12 pilots, three navigators and seven flight engineers presently with the unit cover targets from the mountainous highlands to the flat, Southern delta.

Major Hay-Chapman says "Our mission requires maximum performance from the aircraft. We must fly just above the tree tops on a slow precise track to lay the weed killer on target. Since we can't perform normal evasive tactics, we are dandy targets for VC pot shots."

The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and aircraft maintenance men from the U.S. Air Force, 6930th...



U.S. AIR FORCE MAJOR Lormier ("Larry") W. Hay-Chapman commander of the Ranch Hand Aerial Spray Flight, explains the spray procedures to Maj. Russell ("Russ") E. Mohnney, Major Mohnney will take command of the only U.S. Air Force combat spray flight shortly. (U.S. Air Force Photo by 1st Lt. Mike Potockick).





BETWEEN FLIGHTS. TSgt. Henry E. Heath and an assistant prepare to load a spray-equipped C-123 with a defoliating liquid. Sergeant Heath is attached to the Ranch Hand Aerial Spray Flight from the 6250th Consolidated Aircraft Maintenance Squadron. (U.S. Air Force Photo by 1st Lt. Mike Potochick)



BEFORE TAKEOFF, 1st Lt. James W. Simms, Capt. John R. Spey, and Capt. Harold W. Swanson, (L-r) discuss their jungle target.

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The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and aircraft maintenance men from the U.S. Air Force 6250th Consolidated Aircraft Maintenance Squadron (CAMRON) provide ground support.

ARVN troops store, transport and load the defoliant spray. Using high speed mixing tanks, they can load a C-123 with 1,000 gallons of spray in eight minutes. The fast loading is required for quick turn-around and return to the target.

Air support for a spray mission consists of a mixed force. On Operation Sherwood, a recent defoliation of the Boi Moi woods 30 miles North-northwest of Saigon, the C-123s were accompanied by 16 VNAF A-1E Skyraiders, three U.S. Army UH 1B armed helicopters, two U.S. Air Force HH-43 rescue helicopters, two Cessna O1F spotter planes and one U.S. Army 57th Medical Detachment ambulance helicopter.

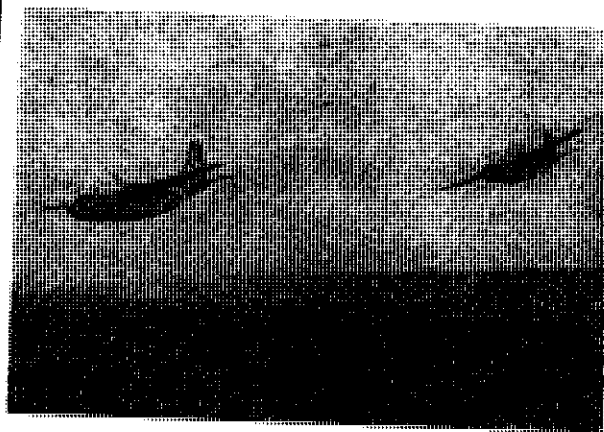
Defoliations in Vietnam began as an experiment, "In the beginning," says Major Hay-Chapman, "we were trying to determine if spray flying was practical. Should this be made a part of the Air Force jungle warfare doctrine?"

Spray flying — still in the new weapon category — is one of many unique jungle warfare techniques being tried by the U.S. Air Force in Vietnam. "It is just one more way for us to get at the Viet Cong," says one USAF officer. "The spray denies them cover for ambushes so common in the past."

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ACTIVATING THE SPRAY EQUIPMENT, TSgt. Robert L. Müller, Ranch Hand flight engineer releases a load of weed killer on a suspected Viet Cong position. (U.S. Air Force Photo by SSgt. Art McGraw).



TWO RANCH HAND C-123s drop to tree-top level to begin spraying the jungle foliage with liquid weed killer. (U.S. Air Force Photo by SSgt. Art McGraw).