

SIX PURPLE HEARTS on the side of a Ranch Hand aircraft are pointed out by TSgt Raul Gamboa, maintenance chief for the defoliation planes. "Leper Colony" has been hit 212 times by Viet Cong ground fire and six crew members have been wounded during missions.

'Most-Shot-At' Title May Go To Crews of Defoliation Unit

By SSgt Stewart Diamond

FOUR OF THE most-shot-at aircraft in Vietnam are daily robbing the Viet Cong of dense jungle foliage which conceals staging areas, supply depots and ambush sites. Hedge-hopping over the trees 50 to 100 feet above the ground, men of the 309th Air Commando Sq's Special Aerial Spray Flight, better known as Ranch Hand, defoliate the Viet Cong hiding places with an aerial spray.

The C-123 used by Ranch Hand to carry out its mission have taken many direct hits from rifle and automatic weapons fire.

"Leper Colony" is the most-hit aircraft, with 212 hits and six Purple Hearts awarded to crew members. "Patches" has received 165 hits and four Purple Hearts. "Miss Susan" has collected 172 hits and two Purple Hearts, followed by "Little Devil" with 112 hits and one Purple Heart.

Each hit, after being repaired by sheet metal workers and the aircraft maintenance section at Tan Son Nhut AB, is painted red to indicate where the plane was hit. On the nose of the aircraft, a bull's-eye is painted "to provide the Viet Cong something

to shoot at," according to a maintenance sergeant.

For each crewman wounded on a Ranch Hand flight, a Purple Heart is painted on the left side of the aircraft fuselage. The men point happily to the fact that no one has been killed.

Spray missions are normally carried out by three C-123s, flying in formation over heavily-wooded terrain. The Providers are escorted by strike aircraft for protection, but at low-level altitudes, Ranch Hand still takes a lot of fire.

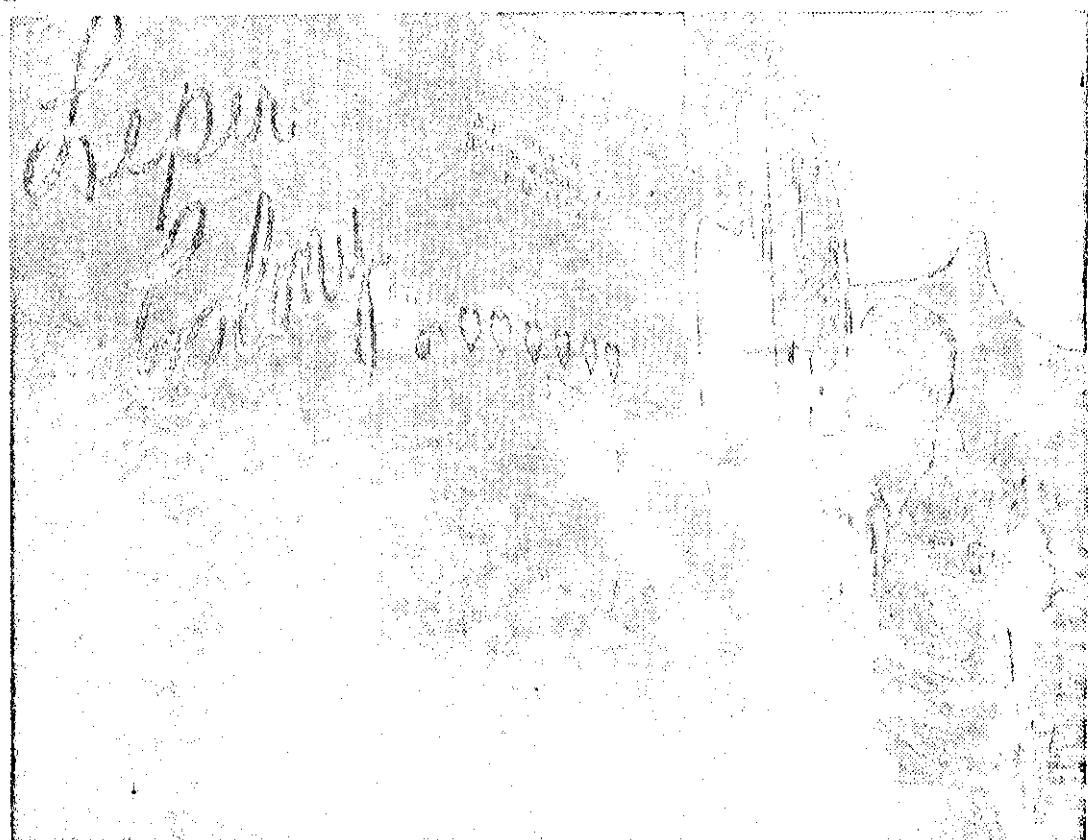
All spray aircraft have special armor plating, including an armored steel box for the crew chief who controls the spray.

Still, the main danger lies in ricochetting bullets. Ranch Hands, from crew chiefs to pilots, are all volunteers.

According to SSgt James N. Bassett, a crew member on a defoliation aircraft, "We expect to get shot at on each mission. If we don't, then it seems like we've been handed a present."

"I was pretty scared my first few flights, but now it doesn't bother me too much," said the veteran of over 350 combat sorties.

He was awarded the Purple Heart for wounds received during a flight when VC ground fire was unusually accurate.



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