

# "Ranch Hands"

Defoliation Flushes

Rustlers from Their Lair

by Major Cleve Cunningham

photo by Major John R. Shippe

"Only we can prevent a forest", proudly boast the U.S. Air Force pilots of the 12th Air Commando Squadron, based at Bien Hoa Air Base and commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Art McConnell.

Known as the "RANCH HANDS", the unique squadron has been destroying jungle foliage in Vietnam since 1961 while pioneering new techniques of defoliation in the process. In the III Corps Tactical Zone they have stripped the cover of the jungle from the enemy in such places as the Ho Bo woods or along the ambush alleys of Highway 13—at a cost of \$26 an acre.

Flying sturdy C-123 transport aircraft, the purple-scarved pilots unloose their defoliant over enemy base camps, infiltration routes or ambush sites at 100 feet above the ground—just high enough to skim the triple-canopied jungle they attack. If the ground is flat, their flight is flat; if rolling, then so is their spray run. Their speed of 140 knots gets them across nine miles of target in four minutes, with each plane spraying an area of 250-300 meters. A six ship mis-

sion defoliates 1,800 acres.

The squadron gets its missions from one of three sources: field force commanders, province chiefs or ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) corps commanders. These missions begin as requests which have to be approved by the ARVN Joint General Staff. Then they come back down the channels through the Military Assistance Command Vietnam, to Seventh Air Force.

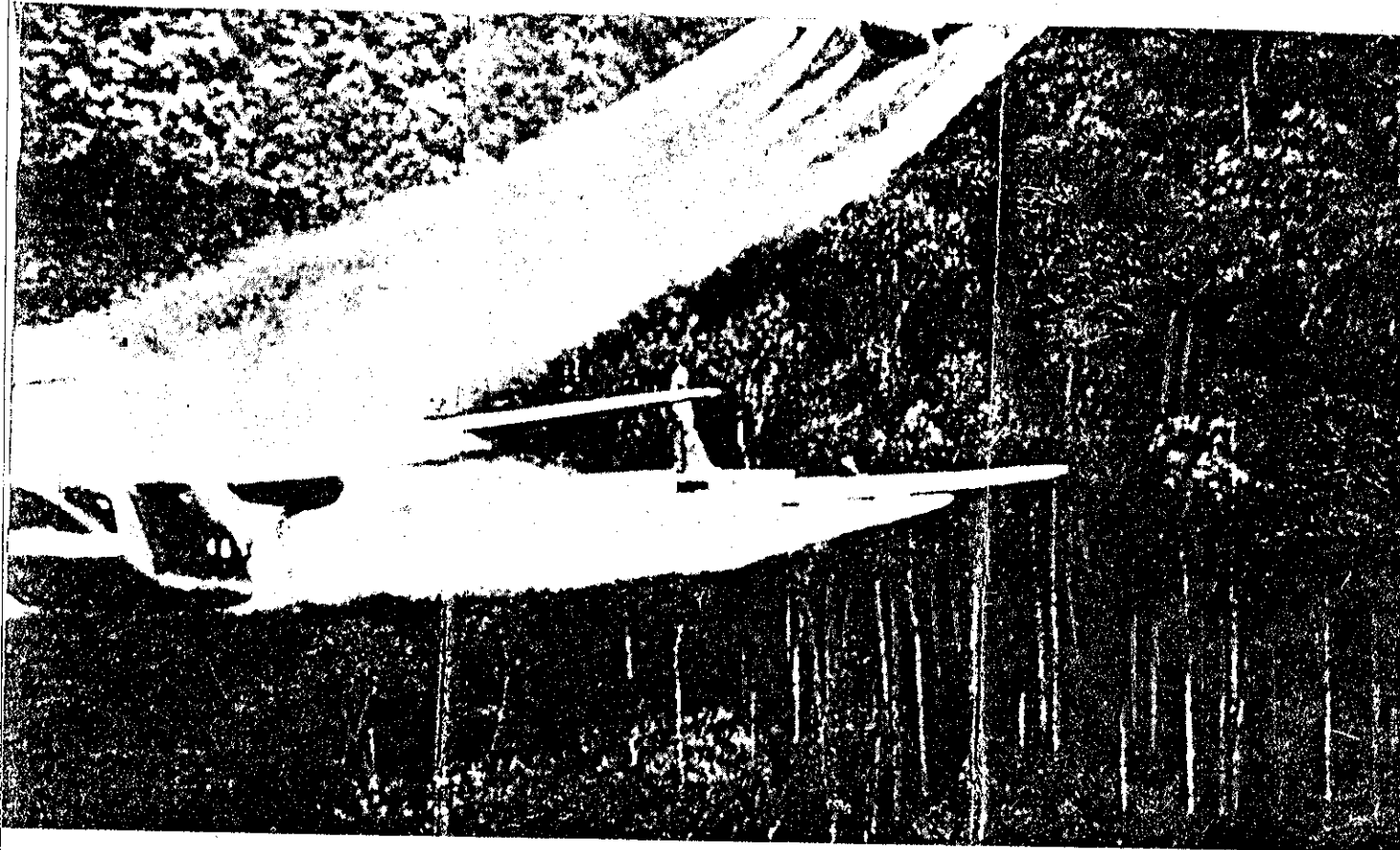
Four missions a day are flown from Bien Hoa and two more are flown from the squadron's Da Nang detachment for a total of 24 daily sorties. One additional C-123 flies exclusively in support of mosquito-suppression missions throughout Vietnam.

The pilots report for pre-flight briefings around 0500 hours and are aloft on their first sortie of the day at first light. They are preceded over their target by a Forward Air Controller, who marks

the start of their spray run with smoke and who controls the F-4 Phantom jets flying suppressive support to protect them from ground fire.

In the rear of the ship, sitting in an armor-plated "box", is the enlisted flight engineer controlling the spray mechanism. Before he begins spraying, the 1,000 gallon tank and contents have added 11,000 pounds to the gross weight of the plane, slightly over the manufacturer's limitation. For this reason, takeoffs and the initial descent to the target require extreme skill.

The recent phased addition of "K" models to the squadron's fleet,



with their two jet-assisted engines, will improve this situation.

Returning to their base from the first mission, the crews conduct an extensive debriefing—actually a self-criticism session—since, as members of the only defoliation squadron in the world, they are acutely aware that they are writing the doctrine for future use in other counter-insurgency situations, or for peacetime development of under-developed areas.

"If peace were to come to Vietnam tomorrow," says Colonel McConnell, "we could be used to eradicate mosquitoes, to spread

liquid or granular fertilizers, and even for crop dusting."

One of the squadron's most famous ships, named "Patches" because it picked up so many ground fire hits, (and the only C-123 to fly around the world) was used for such a humanitarian mission when it left Vietnam. On its way home, Patches and crew were loaned to Iran and Afghanistan for destruction of locusts threatening the crops of those countries.

In Vietnam, though, the mission is still to deprive the enemy of his jungle protection. The Air Force spent 38.8 million dollars for this

end in Fiscal Year; in FY 69 they have budgeted 70.8 million dollars. The average "cowboy" in the RANCH HANDS will fly four to five hundred hours and receive ten Air Medals. He will wear the purple scarf, symbolic of the day when Nguyen Cao Ky appreciatively gave his to an early squadron commander, and respond to the radio command: "Let's go—COW-BOYS!" with nerve-straining descents of up to 4,000 feet a minute over enemy terrain.

For only the RANCH HANDS can prevent a forest from hiding the rustlers.

***Only we can prevent a forest...***