



This story by
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COLLEGE STATION -- The story of the Air Force pilots who performed aerial spraying of Agent Orange in Vietnam is being written by a Texas A&M University graduate student.

Paul Cecil, himself a former pilot on the herbicide missions in 1967, points out he is not writing the history of Agent Orange. Instead, he is interested in the history of the "Ranch Hands," the 1,200 men who performed the aerial spraying of herbicides in Vietnam.

During the life of the code name "Ranch Hand" operation from 1961 to 1970, the pilots flew more than 3,000 separate missions, spraying approximately 11,300,000 gallons of Herbicide Orange on an estimated 10 percent of the landmass of Vietnam. Its use was discontinued in 1971, but planes continued to spray with other substances for another year.

The desired effects were to improve combat visibility by destroying dense jungle and forest vegetation and to destroy crops that might benefit the enemy, Cecil said.

"Agent Orange is a media term," Cecil said, leaning back in his chair inside a small study carrel on campus. "We never used that term. The name Herbicide Orange comes from an orange stripe that was painted on the drums of this particular substance. We sprayed three types of herbicides -- one was painted with an orange stripe, another with white and another with blue, which we called purple because it was the official color of Vietnamese Air Force Commander General Nguyen Cao Ky's squadron which was our host."

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Add 1

After 21 years in the service and his direct involvement in the "Ranch Hand" operation, Cecil is skeptical that Agent Orange caused any specific health problems.

"No one knows," he said. "Tests showed that only about 6 percent of the herbicide reached the ground on a typical spraying. There is no scientifically proven data that low level exposure to dioxin, the toxic ingredient in Herbicide Orange, leads to any of the health problems reported."

But during one last mission for the Ranch Hands, Cecil and his fellow pilots will be involved in a comprehensive medical evaluation that is designed to end the controversy over the herbicide.

The Ranch Hands have been asked by the government to volunteer for testing because, Cecil said, air flow patterns in the C123s flown on the spraying missions caused the crews to be exposed to "1,000 times the maximum Herbicide Orange dosage received by forces on the ground."

"If Orange caused problems, the air crews would show it first. We are the only group that they can pinpoint exactly on time and amount of direct exposure," he said.

The medical study was only one topic on the minds of the Ranch Hand pilots when they recently met for a reunion in Florida, Cecil said. Mostly, they talked over old times. And Cecil took advantage of the occasion to further his oral interviews for his doctoral dissertation on the unit.

"What I want to get is information on the people involved, the guys that served. I want to know what they felt. What are their impressions...how did they feel," he said.

Add 2

"Historians used to have it much easier because everyone of importance kept diaries and journals. But nowadays, nobody writes. Historians are increasingly turning to use of oral histories. You take a tape recorder and find somebody that was an eyewitness and start asking questions."

Cecil feels the Ranch Hands were unique because it was a unit that didn't exist before and doesn't exist now. It was created for a specific task that will probably never be used again.

Many of the pilots he has interviewed recount exciting stories of flying just above stall speed at treetop level while their unarmed aircraft were pelted with bullets. Above were fighter escorts who responded to the "fire" the sprayers drew.

Cecil has spent much of his research time on the Ranch Hand squadron working through the Air Force to get security clearance to read many of the unit's documents that are still classified.

"I've even found things I wrote stamped to a classification that I now can't see," he said.

"I plan to take this data and hopefully put it in logical layman's terms that will make some contribution. In my opinion, it is important to know why we are what we are. We need to know our history and apply it to today in order to live with each other."