



# SHORT BURSTS

3RD TAC FTR WG (DXI)

BIEN HOA AB, RVN

16 OCTOBER 1968

## TRADITION AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS PART OF 12TH SOS LORE

The Ranch Hands of the 12th Special Operations Squadron (Defoliation) gathered last night in a special Dining-In at both the Officers' Open Mess and the Airman's Club Annex, to mark the second anniversary since the squadron was officially designated a separate unit.

General George S. Brown, 7AF commander, visited Bien Hoa to join in the anniversary celebration and addressed both assembled groups.

The Ranch Hands, although marking their second anniversary, have been in Vietnam since Jan. 1962, operating first as the Special Aerial Spray Flight out of Tan Son Nhut and subsequently under the direction of several different organizations until Oct. 1966.

In this short time they have compiled an enviable record of accomplishments and have created a tradition of their own which even today binds the men with an esprit de corps found only in elite units.

Historical facts about their early operation are sketchy but their oldest tradition stems from one of their earliest missions. At that time the Premier of the Republic of Vietnam flew on a mission with the Ranch Hands and upon landing removed the purple silk scarf from around his neck and presented it to the aircraft commander in a small, private ceremony in which the 12th SOS was 'adopted' by the Vietnamese Air Force. To this day the men of the Ranch proudly wear their purple scarves embossed with the squadron emblem and pilots and navigators are awarded VNAF wings after flying 200 combat hours.

And they do mean combat hours as again they point with pride and call themselves the most shot-at unit in Vietnam... a rather dubious distinction. Flying their daily defoliation missions the UC-123 aircraft and crews are the favorite targets of the enemy who shoot away at the aircraft as they make their tree-top level spraying passes over suspected enemy area.

More than 3,000 hits from enemy ground fire have been taken by the 12th SOS. "And that's only since they started counting," said Lieutenant Colonel Arthur F. McConnell, Jr., present commander of the squadron.

"We had one UC-123 we nicknamed 'Patches' which alone took 546 hits from ground fire before she was sent back to the states in June 1968," he added. McConnell also pointed to the record of Ranch Hands, past and present who have accumulated 11 Silver Stars, 47 Purple Hearts, 135 Distinguished Flying Crosses and 608 Air Medals.

In July of this year, the 12th SOS reached another milestone in spraying the 4,000,000th acre since the defoliation program began. They accomplished this with an outstanding safety record of no aircraft accidents, and is a tribute to the flying skill and professionalism of the crews.

Each mission of the 12th SOS is a carefully planned and coordinated project that involves many units and agencies. Defoliation missions are initiated by ground commanders and province chiefs and are coordinated between Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), the Vietnamese Joint General Staff, 7th Air Force and 12th SOS personnel. All defoliation projects are approved by the U.S. Embassy.

Following approval, further coordination is held between forward air controllers and tactical fighter units which provide fire suppression over the area to be sprayed.

Flying precision formation in flights of from two to eight aircraft, the crews bring their vulnerable UC-123s down to 100 to 150 feet at speeds of 130 knots, spreading their spray which is a general purpose plant herbicide used extensively in the U.S.

That their mission is important and successful is attested to by the fact that the enemy continually tries to exploit the chemical warfare aspects of defoliation. In reality the herbicide is harmless to humans and animals but it does strip the jungle cover from the enemy's hiding areas, ambush sites and opens up his lines of communications and infiltration routes.

"None of it would be possible without the maintenance men," McConnell stated. "You don't have a professional outfit without topflight maintenance."

And with that he parted to join the rest of the men in another tradition which declares that new crewmembers receiving their first hit by ground fire "set-up" the rest of the squadron.

"Since we were chosen by God, as the heirs of the freedom that exists in these great United States, we should consider ourselves very fortunate, and strive to pass this gift on to our children and grandchildren." (1st Lt. Joyce A. Benson, Travis AFB, Calif., 1967 Freedoms Foundation award-winning letter.)