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HERBICIDAL WARFARE The RANCH HAND Project in Vietnam

by Paul F. Cecil

In 1961, the United States Air Force began using chemical herbicides as a weapon in Southeast Asia. The tactic lasted only ten years, but the controversy it provoked continues to this day. Criticisms range from the charge that the herbicides did irreparable damage to the Asian environment to the recent "Agent Orange" lawsuits claiming that the chemicals have caused U.S. servicemen and their children physical and mental impairments. While much attention has been given to these claims, little light has been cast on the actual history of the herbicidal operation, code-named RANCH HAND.

Herbicidal Warfare is the history of this unique aviation mission, from its conception to its termination. It describes how the operation dispensed over 11 million gallons of chemicals over Southeast Asian jungles and croplands while flying unarmed, obsolescent aircraft at tree-top level. Based on the author's own experiences, hundreds of interviews with RANCH HAND veterans, and careful research of primary sources, many of which have only recently been declassified, this book provides a comprehensive and in-depth view of the men who flew the missions and their role in the events in Southeast Asia. It also reviews the scientific reaction to herbicidal warfare and how the controversy that ensued eventually caused the cancellation of the operation.

Herbicidal Warfare presents the RANCH HAND project from the standpoint of the participants. It views chemical herbicides as a viable, useful weapon in conflicts involving a guerrilla environment, while also citing justifiable criticism of several elements of the program as it was practiced in Vietnam. For the general reader it provides an alternative view to that usually offered by the media. For the military historian, it provides a broader and more vivid account than is currently available from official histories. Military planners will also find it useful as a study of a weapons system and the consequent effect of scientific opposition to its development.

Continued.....

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Paul F. Cecil is Senior Research Historian in charge of Automated Data Services at the Texas State Historical Association and Associate Editor of the "Handbook of Texas". A retired Lt. Colonel in the United States Air Force, he flew over 1000 combat missions, many in the RANCH HAND project.

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