

Participated in two special missions that I can think of. Unfortunately, the reasons these missions were "special" are still classified, as far as I know. The first was a mission where we staged out of Ubon, Thailand. The date of the mission was 18 January 1969. We took seven airplanes, and took off the afternoon of the 17th - flew north to Pleiku (from Bien Hoa) then swung west across Laos to Ubon. We landed at Ubon in the middle of the afternoon and got our mission and intelligence briefing. We went downtown to the hotel and spent the rest of the afternoon sightseeing, shopping, and having rickshaw races. The morning of the mission we decided that the airborne spare (my crew) would participate in the mission even if all the scheduled planes reached the target. The mission itself was relatively uneventful. We flew position number 7 and took no hits. The afternoon of the 18th we flew back from Ubon to Bien Hoa. No sweat. My copilot was Howard Clark.

The second special mission was on 1 May 1969. The intelligence briefing talked about an exceptionally "hot" target, which it turned out to be. The unusual thing about this mission, other than the heavy ground fire, was that our admin officer rode the box. The mission site was Trouc Giang, southeast of Bien Hoa. It was a six-ship flight, and I believe we were number 5. The suppression was slightly off target, and my main recollection is that as we went down the target run the radio calls were "Lead's takin' hits", "Two's takin' hits", "Three's takin' hits"... and so on down the line. Somewhere during the run, I saw a round, .50 caliber hole appear in the lower left-hand part of the instrument panel. On the way back from the mission, we were showing almost no fuel in the left tank, but the flight mechanic said he didn't see anything leaking. After landing we found about 14 holes in the airplane, among them one in the overhead circuit breaker panel, that was causing the bad fuel indication. None of the planes flew a second mission that day - too much battle damage. A couple of days later, on the first mission, I pulled my clear helmet visor down (it had been up during the Trouc Giang mission) and found it shattered. The only thing we could conclude was that the bullet had come through the instrument panel, hit the edge of the helmet where the visor was stowed, and ricocheted up into the overhead panel. A close enough call to suit me.

QUESTION # 8

MEAD 7557

Got an end-of-tour DFC for the Truuc Giang mission talked about above. Got a total of 10 Air Medals, among them a one-time AM for a trash-hauling mission. We were operating out of Phan Rang, helping out our cargo bretheren. We had picked up a load of passengers at An Khe (Army troops on the way to R&R), and the next stop was Nha Trang. We were in the landing patters, and had advanced the RPM to 2400 for landing. About that time the plane started shaking, and a hole opened up in the left side, right at the prop line. After some confusion in the cockpit, which I'm not very proud of, we got the engine shut down and landed. Turned out about a foot of prop blade had come off and come through the fuselage. One of the passengers got hit by the blade, was badly hurt, and I understand he later died. Felt badly about that. The airplane number was 666.

QUESTION # 9

Was present during many attacks on the base. They got to be almost a nightly happening for awhile. We had sandbags piled around the hootches, and had what we thought was a pretty good rocket shelter. There was a period of a week or two when we evacuated the airplanes to Phan Rang because of danger of rocket attacks. Things got tense enough for a short time that we were taking our weapons to the hootch at night in case the bad guys tried to come across the fence. They never did, and I don't recall any Ranchers getting hurt in a rocket attack. There was a Vietnamese bar that we could see from the hootch. Popular wisdom had it that if the bar closed early you could expect a rocket attack that night. I doubt if that bit of folk wisdom would stand up to rigorous analysis.

QUESTION # 10

No, I never saw a Ranch aircraft shot down. One was shot down during my tour, but made a successful belly landing at a Special Forces camp and no one was injured.

QUESTION # 11

MEAD 7557

Never directly saw anyone killed or wounded. In fact, there were no fatalities during my tour. One day Hugh Scott's plane took a hit in the herbicide tank, and the flight mechanic got herbicide in his eyes. He got a Purple Heart for that, I believe.

QUESTION # 12

The Only unusual battle damage was what I mentioned under question # 7.

QUESTION # 13

Yes. The lead and deputy lead pilots and lead and deputy lead navigators planned the missions together. Actually, the navs did a lot of the mission planning, and the pilots normally amened it.

QUESTION # 14

I got into the Ranch directly through the good graces of the Air Force - a non-volunteer. I had heard something of the mission beforehand through an acquaintance that had just completed a tour there when I got my orders. The Ranch picked up some people while we were going through training at Hurlburt, but my orders read "12 ACS" from the beginning.

QUESTION # 15

There was no formal training about the chemicals, either in the States or in Vietnam. The "old head" Ranchers told us that the stuff was perfectly safe, that they would even drink it. Never saw anybody drink it, though.

QUESTION # 16

No particular incident stands out. The happy memories are of the flying and the people - the sad memories involve family separation.

QUESTION # 17

MEAD 7557

One day on a trash-hauling mission we had stopped at a Special Forces camp and the commander asked if we would like to do a little leaflet-dropping on the way to Pleiku. Sure. He briefed us on where the target was, so when we got there, we made a big circle and dropped them out the left troop door. Bad move. The airflow was such that all those leaflets came back through the door into the airplane. Looked like a snowstorm in there. Fortunately, the loadmaster got them all cleaned up by the time we got to Pleiku.

QUESTION # 18

No answer for this one

QUESTION # 19

The Ranch was along one street on the east side of Bien Hoa AB. The quarters were wooden hootches with tile roofs. With air conditioners that our pre-decesors had scrounged they were pretty comfortable. Ours had cubicles, each with a bed, desk, chair, and clothes locker. We had a sitting room in front with a bar, referigerator, TV, chairs, and table. What with the steel clothes lockers, plywood partitions, etc, the cubibles were fairly private.

Generally a crewmember flew about four times a week. On flying days, we got up about 0430 and were on the first target by about 0700 or 0730. The second mission took off about 1000 and was back by about 1130 or 1200. Lunch was usually at the Club, then an afternoon nap. If you were lead for the next day's mission, mission planning was done about 1430 to 1600. The predinner cocktail hour was usually about 1700. We ate dinner at the club unless it was some special occasion, such as someone getting some steaks from the Army. Bedtime varied, but tended to be early, especially if you were flying the next day.

If you weren't flying, there were various ways to occupy the time. Some went to the library, some went to the tape center. Sometimes there were sandbags to be filled. There were always letters to write.

QUESTION # 19 (cont)

MEAD 7557

There was generally a going-away party every month. Dress-up affairs, in the purple flying suits. Lots of booze. We had a "Ranch-in" once during the year I was there. Sort of analogous to a dining-in. This one was a formal affair with a guest speaker. The guest speaker was General Brown who was commander of 7th AF at the time. The squadron commander had passed the word that the General would indeed be allowed to speak and not shouted down, as was the Ranch custom. When dinner was over, the General got up to speak, and made a short, slightly unpolished speech, with everyone listening attentively. Turns out, so the story goes, that he had not prepared any remarks for that night because he fully expected to be shouted down. One more observation about parties - at Bien Hoa most of the socializing and "happy-houring" was done in the hootches, while the Danang folks had more tendency to gather at the Club. I don't know why.

QUESTION # 20

I agree that the Ranch was a very special outfit, and I can't think of another I would rather have served with. I think that a lot of the specialness of the Ranch had to do with image. The people who made up the Ranch were probably no better and no worse than any other outfit with a combat mission. But the Ranch mission was definitely unique, and we used large, clumsy airplanes in an unconventional way. That in itself provided a little mental one-upsmanship over the trash haulers.

By the time of my tenure the Ranch was probably more institutionalized than in the early days when it was a volunteer, split-off "spray flight". In those early days a lot of the reputation of the Ranch was established, and those of us who came later did our damndest to live up to and carry on that spirit involved in wearing the purple scarf and flying low, slow airplanes close to the ground. That reputation carried a long way. I always felt that the Ranch mission was not quite as dangerous as those outside the Ranch were allowed to believe. After a mission where we took some ground fire, I was in the bar that evening and one of the fighter pilots

QUESTION #20 (cont)

MEAD 7557

that had flown suppression told me that the Ranch really flew good and really had balls. I would never argue the point because it was true, but it goes to show what a little reputation can do.

The Ranch was special because the mission was special. The uniqueness of the mission drew attention to the Ranch and the people. The people in the Ranch were special because of that attention, the image I talked about above, the fact that we were doing something over and above normal trash hauling, and because we share the bond of having been in the situation where the next four minutes were not going to be a lot of fun.

One more thing - the Ranch provided an outlet for conservative transport jocks and frustrated would-be fighter pilots to do a lot of legal buzzing. The most fun flying I've ever done.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

I know of two published articles about the Ranch that might be of interest-  
Time , May 25, 1970, an article generally critical of aerial defoliation, complete with color pictures

The Cleveland Plain Dealer , September 25, 1968, a full-page newspaper story on the Ranch.

I'm also enclosing some slides. The people in the pictures are marked on the frames.

One final enclosure - a bawdy cartoon that was circulating sometime around Christmas, 1968.

I hope this material will be of some use to you. It was fun getting out the slides and scrapbooks and looking at them again. Good luck on your project.

*To the Ranch!  
Ron Wood*