

Please type or use pen to provide the requested information. This data will be used for the Ranch Hand History Project and then placed in the Archives at Texas A&M. It is your information. If you wish to restrict any part of this material, please indicate so.

I hereby authorize the scholarly use of the following information, except as indicated.

Name (last) THOMAS, HOWELL first V middle  signature Howell S. Thomas date 22 FEB 82

#### Specific Information

Please answer the following questions in the spaces provided. Be specific.

1. Ranch Hand service: From 16 Nov 65 to 25 Sept 66. Where? SIAGON/DA NANG
2. RH/C-123 training: Where/when? HURLBURT + LANGLEY
3. Rank while in RH? CAPTAIN Present/retired rank? LT COLONEL
4. Duty(s) while in Ranch? PILOT/TP dates? INCLUSIVE
5. Other Vietnam service? Where/when? NONE
6. If aircREW member:
  - a. Number of missions: RH 386 Other (specify) See #19
  - b. Combat flying hours: RH 693.0 Other (specify) —

#### Narrative Information

On a separate sheet(s) of paper, please answer the following questions with as much detail as possible. Write too much, rather than too little. Use names and dates, if possible. If you want a name "blacked out" before this goes in the archives, just circle the name. On the sheets, indicate the number of the question you are answering, and put your last name and the form number in the upper right-hand corner of each sheet.

7. Special missions/operations participated in? (name, when, where, what, who else)
8. Decorations? (If Purple Heart, DFC, or above, give date and details of the act. If you have a copy of the narrative justifying the medal, please attach a copy.)
9. Were you present during an attack against the base, Ranch site, or quarters? Explain.
10. Were you present when a Ranch aircraft was shot down or crashed? Give all details.
11. Were you present when a Ranch crew member was killed or wounded? Give as much data as possible, even if you didn't directly observe it or are not sure of date or names.
12. Did you ever see or repair unusual battle damage (more than routine skin holes)?
13. Did you ever help plan RH missions? If so, what was the procedure?
14. How did you get into the Ranch? What did you know about the mission beforehand?
15. What were you told about the chemicals used? In Vietnam? Before Vietnam?
16. Other than something already discussed (or going home), what is your happiest memory of the Ranch (or Vietnam)? What is your unhappiest (saddest)?
17. What unusual, odd-ball, weird, funny, etc., thing happened to you in VN or training?
18. Same as question 17, but you saw it happen to another person(s).
19. What were your quarters like? Your routine day? Your parties? Anything else?
20. We know that the Ranch was unique. What should I tell the reader that will help him understand why this was a special outfit of special people? What or who should I not talk about?

Other data: Do you have any good pictures (especially of RH members), any journals, notes, diaries, letters, briefing notes, maps, etc., that I could copy? If so, DO NOT SEND THEM with this form. Repeat... DO NOT SEND THEM!!!! Describe the items on a separate piece of paper, with your name and form number on it. I will write and give you instructions on when to send them, or how to get them copied, at a later date. All materials will be protected and returned to you!!! Thank you for your help and time.

Please return this form and the narrative sheets in the enclosed envelope to Texas A&M.

THOMAS

7884

INTRODUCTION:

I was initially assigned to Hurlburt Field Florida in July 1965 for C-123 transition training. Upon arrival I met Ralph Dresser and others who mentioned the Ranch and I promptly organized my way out of the Troop Carrier business and into the Ranch. After training at Hurlburt we went to Langley AFB, VA for specialized spray training. There we sprayed the islands off the Virginia Coast. We even sprayed Langley for mosquitoes a couple of times. From Langley we went back to Hurlburt to pick up three birds that were being modified with spray rigs at Crestview FL. With these three birds we flew across the Pacific to Siagon - what a trip! We flew from Crestview, FL to Tinker AFB, OK and from Tinker to McCellan, AFB, CA. As oil quantity was our limiting factor we ran oil consumption data across the U.S. When we got to McCellan we strapped a 55 gal drum of oil to each side of the cargo compartment. Each had a hand crank pump installed with a hose leading into the respective engine oil tank. All the way across the Pacific, every hour on the hour, based on our cruise figures, we pumped oil, into each engine oil tank - it worked like a charm - crude but it worked. At McCellan we became the "wards" of the 2nd Aerial Delivery Group till we arrived in Siagon. We flight planned our trip and at first light one morning (see slide) we took off from McCellan headed for Hickam AFB, HI. If I recall, the allowable cabin load (ACL) on the C-123 (without jets) was 54,000 lbs. We lifted off the runway at McCellan at 62,800 lbs. On each bird we had 6 folks and equipment; full load of

THOMAS

7884

gas including the "herbie tank" and 110 gals of oil, and away we went. We flew the first 5 hrs of our trip at 3000 ft as the bird wouldn't climb any higher. Our route was Hickam, AFB, HI, Midway IS., Wake IS., Andersen, AFB, GUAM, Clark, AFB, PI., and Siagon. A book could be written on the things that occurred on the trip over as only a couple of the pilots had previous "Recip" time. Dick Peshkin was nicknamed the "Backfire King". He never started one, all the way across without backfiring it - as a matter of fact, he blew a carb diaphragm out on start at Midway Island! Any way, after many long hours of fun and flying we made it to Siagon. The size of the Ranch was nearly doubled overnight. Until we arrived they only had 4 birds. Maj Russ Money was the commander when we arrived - he's now a two star General! From here just review the answers to your questions - hope they help in your efforts. If you have questions just call or drop me a line.

7. SPECIAL MISSIONS/OPERATIONS PARTICIPATED IN?

**Ton Son Nhut Operation:** Primarily in country sorties. Some of note include; the Ba Loi Woods project, the Siagon Ship Channel, the Michelin Rubber Plantation and numerous burns around special forces camps all the way to the DMZ. Also the DMZ burn north of Da Nang.

**Da Nang:** 90% of all our sorties there were run in Laos and northern Cambodia. Primarily the Ho Chi Min Trail and the Sianook Road in north-

THOMAS

7884

ern Cambodia. This included the Ashau Valley campaign in which Maj Bernard Fisher received the Medal of Honor for his rescue of his wingman who crash landed (A1E) at Ashau. NOTE: Otis Taylor has a tape of the rescue that he recorded off the aircraft radios.

8. DECORATIONS: 2 DFC's and numerous Air Medals. RVN Gallantry Cross with Gold Star. Citations attached.

9. SEVERAL ATTACKS: Seven troops, including myself, rented a villa on "100 P Alley" outside the gate at Ton Son Nhut. In late 1965 we sat on the roof and watched the mortar attack on the base. The VC got the fuel dump, the T.V. relay bird (C-121) and wiped out numerous aircraft, especially on "Charlie Row". No Ranch birds were damaged. At Da Nang we were periodically mortared and got quite familiar with the mortar shelters. The most dangerous part of these were the VNAF guards. They shot at anything that moved. Fortunately, no one was ever hit, by them, but the mortars played hell with hangers and "hooches".

10. CRASH OR SHOOT DOWN: Two bird formations out of Da Nang went south down the coast to an area named the "Pineapple Forest". On the third pass, wingman Lt Paul Clanton took a hit in the left engine prop dome. The prop "ran away" and the student, Lt Steve Aigner immediately pulled the nose up and the aircraft dropped below minimum control air speed. At low altitude, even though Paul took the aircraft he was unable to gain suf-

THOMAS

7884

ficient air speed to maintain flight. Aircraft crashed in the target area and received heavy ground fire. Paul was the only one seriously hurt. A Marine chopper, with 11 green berets on board answered our SOS and picked up the crew of three. The chopper took the crew to the hospital at Qui Nhon, and we followed. Paul was later medi-vacked out and to my knowledge is still in the Air Force. An interesting note: The chopper driver was a high school classmate of Paul Clanton's. Neither one knew where the other one had gone since high school. Due to the crash site being inaccessible, and many hostiles being in the area, we let the B-57's out of Da Nang destroy what remained of the aircraft - they did a good job!

11. WOUNDED MEMBERS:

**Otis Taylor;** I was flying as co-pilot in the Delta when we took two .50 caliber hits in the nose of the aircraft. Otis took some shrapnel - nothing serious but did draw blood. When one round exploded it blew both my feet off the floor and into the instrument panel - all I got was two good bruised shins.

**Dick King:** Flying as wingman in N. Laos and we ran into a flak trap. We got away but they didn't. Took several hard hits: Nose, blew out left windshield, left engine and large hole in aft fuselage. The lost all radios and had to recover at NKP as he couldn't clear the mountains on

THOMAS

7884

one engine to get back into Da Nang. Dick took some glass everywhere, but especially in one eye. After a four week stay at the Cam Ron Bay hospital he recovered completely and was flying again.

12. On Easter Sunday, 1966, we took a hit of some sort, in the left gear well while flying a target north of Da Nang. The hit completely blew the tire and wheel. It made a general mess of the left gear and wheel well. We recovered at Siagon on the nose, right main wheel and left gear "stump". We scattered "bits and pieces" for about 800 ft down the runway but no one was hurt and no fire ensued. We managed to slide the aircraft off the runway onto a high speed banked turn off. The aircraft was jacked, a new gear installed and the next morning I flew the same bird with no gear door and a "skinned belly". She flew just fine - Helluva tough durable old bird. NOTE: Sheet metal troops used to follow us down Charlie Row after each mission and actually repair holes between sorties. They started painting patches red (Old Patches) and were told to stop - so they did. They then started putting on patches in card designs, hearts, clubs, spades and diamonds. Once again they were told to stop. So they did. About this time the birds, over our objections, were all painted with "war paint". Then the repair troops put on normal patches and painted them opposite colors; i.e. patch on dark green was painted tan, on tan - dark green etc. Leave it to a bunch of GI's, they won't be outdone!

THOMAS

7884

13. Yes - the total time I was there, especially at Da Nang. We actually worked for the MACV J-3 Chemical Corps (Army) who legally fraged our sorties. In reality we sent them a list of targets we needed to hit (requested or hot spots) and they, through 7 AF cut the frags for targets we supplied them. In essence we planned, fraged and flew our own missions with an occasional special one from MACV J-3. The opinion I got was that MACV J-3 personnel were chemical experts and knew very little about the "Operations" side of the mission! Therefore we did our own thing as we deemed necessary.

14. I volunteered after I got to Hurlburt. I was originally programed into the 309th, "Trash Hauler Division". As I had spent three years in the Aerial Ag Business prior to comming into the Air Force. I knew somewhat, what to expect. I had researched the mission of the Ranch and knew it was a small group of elite folks doing a special mission. This was my kind of outfit and if we had it to do again, heaven forbid, I'd want to go back as a Ranchand!

15. I was only told that we were spraying herbicides. During my tour we primarialy sprayed with "Purple" (24D and 245T) and "White" (Cacadiclic acid - a defoiant). I had previously sprayed both (see question 14) and was thoroughly familiar with the effect and physiologal implications. Data on both chemicals is available through the USDA and Dept of Agriculture.

THOMAS

7884

16. **HAPPIEST:** The comraderie and close knit operation that we enjoyed in the Ranch. We were a special bunch of folks doing a very special, hazardous and gratifying mission.

**UNHAPPIEST:** Watching the flatbeds full of coffins go down "Charlie Row" early every morning prior to our take-off. Our fallen coharts going home!

17/18 See lead in narrative?

19. **QUARTERS:** Siagon - Super! Seven troops rented a villa complete with "house boy" who cleaned the house and washed our dirties. He even took care of our Hondas!

**Da Nang:** Not so nice. We started in open bay "hooches". Half wood sides with screen wire top and bamboo curtains to keep the rain out (didn't work too well though)(see slides). There were 20 guys per "hooch" in double stacked steel GI bunks, and a community "bath-with-a-path". The sidewalks were wood pallets laid down end to end. When it rained heavily they floated away and you were up to your "Arse" in mud when you stepped off them. One step above a tent pretty well expresses the "hooches". Later on they built some cement block "H" barracks with inside plumbing and all bunks were on the floor (no double stacking). These were much better but still open bay type which were hot and damp - I understand that air conditioners were SOP after I came home in 1966.

THOMAS

7884

ROUTINE DAY: In at 0400 to brief and first takeoff prior to sun-up. We tried to hit our first target at sunup. Turn around and continue to work targets till around noon or until spray would not settle. After spraying stopped we would fly survey sorties to check previous work or look at areas to be worked. Frequently after we completed our work I would fly with the Troop Carriers (309th/10th) on evening re-supply or night flare sorties, as three of the guys in our villa were Troop Carriers. Just a sucker for punishment I guess?

PARTIES: Most were in Ops area at Siagon or the DOOM (Da Nang Officers Open Mess). Marines from across the field at Da Nang tried frequently to crash our parties but I can truthfully say they never succeeded! Some pretty good brawls did evolve though! Ask Ralph Dresser about the Marine Brigidere General...

20. Tough question to answer. All Ranchands were volunteers; performed a special and necessary mission in a nasty but unique environment. To my knowledge it is/was the only organization of its type in Air Force history. It's mission was planned, organized, and performed by professionals and today is only alive in the memories of the "Cowboys" who flew in the "Ranch". Please make sure those who are no longer with us are remembered: i.e. Jim Weaver, Roy Krubley and Joe Chalk plus others I may not be aware of!

OTHER DATA: I have many slides, pictures and a 16mm film brief by CBS news that you are welcome to use - just let me know when and how you want them!

CITATION TO ACCOMPANY THE AWARD OF  
THE DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS

TO

LOWELL V. THOMAS

First Lieutenant Lowell V. Thomas distinguished himself by heroism while participating in aerial flight as a C-123 pilot over the Republic of Vietnam on 22 December 1965. On that date, Lieutenant Thomas was engaged in the defoliation of a strategic target, which had been a stronghold of unfriendly forces for several years. Even though the aircraft commander was wounded and the aircraft was continuously exposed to the intense .30 and .50 caliber ground fire, Lieutenant Thomas, with complete disregard for his own personal safety, continued his crew duties. The professional airmanship and ability of Lieutenant Thomas under these hazardous conditions, were instrumental in the successful completion of the mission with only one pass through the target area thereby preventing further damage to other aircraft and possible loss of life. The outstanding heroism and selfless devotion to duty displayed by Lieutenant Thomas reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

CITATION TO ACCOMPANY THE AWARD OF  
THE DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS  
(FIRST OAK LEAF CLUSTER)

TO

LOWELL V. THOMAS

Captain Lowell V. Thomas distinguished himself by heroism while participating in aerial flight as a C-123 Pilot over the Republic of Vietnam on 17 April 1966. On that date, while flying last in a formation engaged in the defoliation of a strategic target, the formation became exposed to ground fire, and Captain Thomas' aircraft sustained battle damage. Despite the damage, Captain Thomas remained on target and when a sister plane was forced off target, Captain Thomas flew cover until successful recovery at an emergency field. The outstanding heroism and selfless devotion to duty displayed by Captain Thomas reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

CITATION TO ACCOMPANY THE AWARD OF  
THE BRONZE STAR MEDAL  
TO  
LOWELL V. THOMAS

Captain Lowell V. Thomas distinguished himself by meritorious service as Flight Maintenance Officer, Special Aerial Spray Flight, 309th Air Commando Squadron, Tan Son Nhut Air Base, Republic of Vietnam from 16 November 1965 to 25 September 1966. During this period, while exposed to danger from hostile forces, Captain Thomas consistently demonstrated professional ability, sound judgement, and great enthusiasm in overcoming the many involved problems associated with his duties. His superb performance and signal contributions assisted materially in the success of the United States' effort in Southeast Asia. The exemplary leadership, personal endeavor, and devotion to duty displayed by Captain Thomas in this responsible position reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.