

MG JERRY RALPH CURRY, UNIT HISTORY: *Activation and Move to Vietnam, 1965*



The 220th Aviation Company was organized on April 15, 1965, at Fort Lewis, Washington, in accordance with the authority contained in Department of the Army Message 707331 dated March 16, 1965, by Sixth U.S. Army General Order dated March 29, 1965. Activated and attached to the 220th was the 231st Signal Detachment commanded by Second Lieutenant **Robert P. Covino**.

Personnel were processed for overseas deployment, military skills were updated, polished and reinforced, and everyone went through rigorous physical conditioning. By Herculean efforts, equipment, other than aircraft, was requisitioned, issued, packed and delivered to the dock in Tacoma, Washington, for ocean transport to Vietnam on June 10, 1965.

“Don’t burden your soldiers with weapons and ammunition,” instructions from the Headquarters U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam welcoming packet read. “You won’t need weapons until long after your arrival in Vietnam.” Obviously these instructions had been written long before U.S. combat troops were committed.

I ignored the instructions. Weapons and ammunition accompanied the troops on their planes. Command Sergeant Major **Carol Simpson** added, “War is full of surprises. We wouldn’t be the first unit to get diverted to another destination.” Chief Warrant Officer **Don Behny**, our maintenance officer, nodded in agreement. The unit’s chief cook and scrounger was Sergeant Pablo Sandoval.

Army doctrine teaches that the second in command, the executive officer, goes ahead of the main body of troops with a small detachment to prepare for the unit’s arrival. It seemed to me that major decisions would have to be made by the advanced party immediately upon its arrival

in Vietnam, and those kinds of determinations should fall on the shoulders of the commander not the second in command.

So on June 19, 1965, I led a party of seven officers and nine enlisted men to Vietnam to advance the 220th's arrival. My Executive Officer, Captain **Bill Schmale**, brought over the main body later.

The day we departed was one of those rare Seattle-Tacoma summer days when the sun shined brightly and the sky was pure blue. We swung aboard a chartered commercial bus, which took us to nearby McChord Air Force Base.

Out over the Pacific Ocean halfway to Honolulu, the Air Force crew chief motioned me to follow him to the back of the cargo plane. "Major" he whispered conspiratorially. "When this airplane gets to Hawaii, it's going to break down. It'll take three days to fix it. So you and your men just might want to relax and enjoy yourselves for awhile." He smiled. "You see, my girl friend lives on Oahu. Haven't seen her in some time. We got a lot of catching up to do."

The crew chief kept his word. Shortly after we landed in Hawaii, word came over the public address system in the military passengers lounge that our airplane had developed mechanical trouble and the flight would be delayed. It was three days before the plane was ready for departure.

Upon arrival in Saigon, we learned that the 220th's station had been changed from a safe area in the south to a front line location with the 3rd U.S. Marine Division in the far north.

We completed our preparations in Saigon on the 30th of June, including the mechanics' assembling five of the units aircraft, which had arrived by ship. Leaving a work party to complete the assembly of the other twenty-seven aircraft, the rest of us flew ourselves north to the 220th's new home.

Our Cessnas were O-1Fs: all Metal, high wing, two place (tandem) monoplanes. They were 25-foot, 9-1/2 inches long with a wingspan of 36 feet. Each aircraft was powered by a six-cylinder, horizontally-opposed, air-cooled engine.

At Phan Thiet we reached the brilliant white sand beaches of the South China Sea and turned north. Later, we over flew Phan Rang and Nha Trang. Then came Tuy Hoa, followed by Qui Nhon, where we stopped to stretch, refuel and eat.

After Qui Nhon came Quang Ngai in Binh Dinh Province. Suddenly the huge U.S. Marine complex at Da Nang came into view. We over flew it and kept flying north-west. We bumped over the Hai Von Pass and started our descent into the Hue basin, the new home of the 220th.

PART TWO:

Hue-Phu Bai was a small asphalt-paved-single runway airport sixty miles north of the city of Da Nang. It was named after the Imperial City of Hue, which was located fourteen kilometers northwest on the Perfume River.

Stepping down from the Cessna's cockpit, I was greeted by Lieutenant Colonel "Rough House" Taylor, Commander of the 3rd Battalion, Fourth Marines. "Welcome to Phu Bai." He grunted. Gesturing over his right shoulder, he added, "The front lines are about a hundred yards in that direction. Dig your foxholes from that clump of trees around to the dry stream bed over there." Squinting into the sun, he pointed with a big knuckled forefinger. "My rules of engagement are simple, anything that moves outside the barbed wire after dark gets shot. Questions?"

"No."

"Then I suggest your men stay put once the sun goes down. When you get settled, come see me. There's a lot to talk about."

Bill Schmale brought the main body of the 220th to Vietnam at 2:30 in the morning on the 4th of July. They touched down at the Marine Air Base in Da Nang in three C-130 U.S. Air Force transports. After refueling and a rest stop, they continued north to join us at Phu Bai.

All hands were immediately put to work expanding the camp and building fortifications. Under direction of CSM Simpson, the enlisted men filled sandbags, built bunkers, and reinforced foxholes. There was little time for socializing.

Captain Dick Quigley, our outstanding operations officer, had the officers don thick leather engineer gloves, pound metal stakes into the ground, and string triple concertina barbed wire fences around our perimeter. Dick had served a previous tour in Vietnam and from experience knew exactly what to do. He was the one who gave the 220th its radio call sign name, Cat Killers, since we flew aircraft nick-named Birddogs.

The first operational surveillance mission was flown on July 5, 1965. Aircraft averaged 120 hours of flight time a month for the first six months at flight operations. This was directly attributable to Chief Behny, our aircraft maintenance foreman. Bob Covino, the signal officer, and the leadership of Captain Jay Weight, our outstanding supply and maintenance officer.

Mr. Ngo, the Vietnamese civilian airfield manager's office was located halfway up the old beige stucco airfield control tower built many years ago by French military forces. It provided an excellent view of the entire airfield.

Chief Behny and I came to conclude some negotiations with him that had been dragging on unsuccessfully for weeks. The 220th sorely needed more aircraft parking space. Our airplanes were jammed so close together that the explosion of a single Viet Cong mortar round would damage or destroy several aircraft at one time.

Mr. Ngo graciously brewed us tea. "I prefer coffee," he said, "but it is much too expensive."

I made a mental note of his request. We sat and drank and talked about the monsoon weather which contributed to the areas 121-inch average annual rainfall. Then we discussed our children. He told us how lovely Vietnam had been before the wars, when Saigon had been known as the Paris of the Orient.

At last when we could no longer postpone the purpose of our meeting, he fetched a blueprint out of a rickety wooden wall cabinet. On it were the location of utility lines, the limited airport parking ramp, and some other technical information.

Smiling obliquely, he said, "Mr. Behny, the area you have requested as a parking area for your airplanes is quite difficult," again he smiled. In his voice was the trace of contempt of someone who believes you can do them no harm.

"As you can see here on the paper and can observe through the window, there is a house located in the middle of the area where you want to park your airplanes. It is occupied by a number of families," he gestured out the window. It is Vietnamese government property and cannot be used by U.S. forces.

I nodded noncommittally, "Yes but we both know it's dilapidated, and any strong wind would blow it down."

He ignored my reply. "Of course I will forward your request to the Saigon government, he assured us in a sweetly reasonable tone of voice. "Certainly you understand that it will take a year or two for Saigon to answer."

"Tomorrow morning at sunrise," I said very softly, "the U.S. Marine bulldozers will arrive to prepare the area for an asphalt parking ramp. The house you see out there in the middle of that area will be leveled along with anything or anyone in it."

I followed this statement with a slight bow.

Paling, Mr. Ngo bowed to me in return.

Chief Behny and I departed. That night we heard noises emanating from the house, noises of people moving around and calling back and forth to each other.

Next morning at first light, two Marine bulldozers clanked into position. Quickly, the Marines leveled the empty relic of a house and construction of the badly needed parking ramp began. As soon as it was completed, Chief Behny moved the aircraft onto it.

Three months later, I received a request from Mr. Ngo asking me to come for another visit. There, Don and I participated in a now familiar ritual of bowing and drinking tea. Finally, pleasantries over, Ngo took a new blue print out of the old rickety and proudly unrolled it on top of his desk.

"Major Curry, this came from Saigon today."

On the blueprint of the airfield were hatched lines with a statement saying that the 220th's aircraft parking area, that we had confiscated, was now U.S. Government property.

Bowing, I said, "Mr. Ngo, it is always a pleasure to do business with you. Rest assured that my government deeply appreciates your efforts on its behalf."

When we got back to the company, I had Sergeant Sandoval take Mr. Ngo two five pound cans of coffee. He was very grateful.

The 220th had two primary missions. First was daily intelligence reconnaissance over South Vietnam's I Corps area. Some areas were important enough to merit daily over-flights. Others were covered once or twice a week, and a few got monthly coverage.

Eventually, we ended up with map overlays of the entire Corps area. Our American pilots flying with South Vietnamese officers in the rear seat as observers quickly learned what was normal in the area and when there had been a change even a subtle one. All changes, such as the construction of a new footbridge across a jungle river, were posted to the master map daily.

The Viet Cong terrorists referred to the Birddog aircraft as the "old women," who told everything they knew. That was the intent.

The 220th's other mission was providing direct support for the 3rd U.S. Marine Division. The Marines didn't have their own observation aircraft so the Army was directed to provide them airplane reconnaissance. That is why the 220th was diverted enroute from supporting U.S. Army units in the south, to flying for the Marines in the north.

Marine officers rode in the rear seat of the Birddogs and handled communications with Marine units during adjustment of naval gunfire or the Forward Air Controlling of Marine fighter-bombers.

Our planes had no armor plate. Not even the seats were protected. The fuel tanks were neither self-sealing nor fire retardant. Bullets sliced through the one-sixteenth of an inch aluminum skin like it was tissue paper. As the war progressed, these aircraft safety deficiencies were corrected.

Primarily we were the eyes and ears of the ground commanders and provided early alert by reconnoitering areas difficult to reach on foot; checking out possible enemy unit locations; looking for signs of ambush, road blocks or other enemy activity; adjusting artillery and naval gunfire and acting as liaison between widely deployed friendly units. The high ship monitored the general development of the battle, as well as kept the low ship in sight at all times. If the low ship was shot down, the high ship took over the mission.

I Corps was broken down into geographical tracts. The tracts were further subdivided into zones and map overlays were developed for each zone. On these overlays were annotated every scrap of intelligence information that could be developed. All kinds of demographic data were

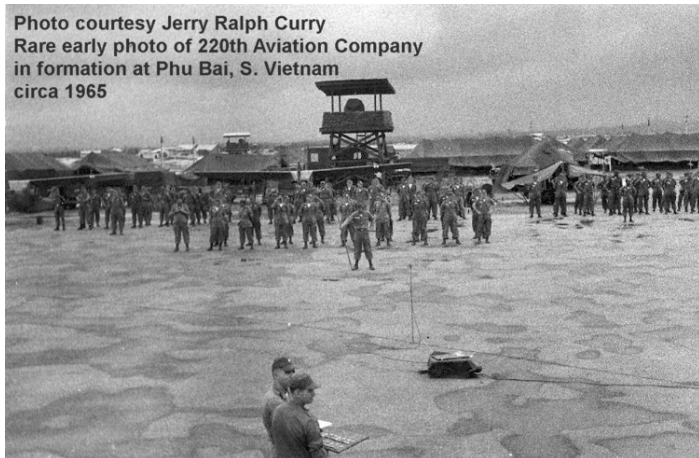
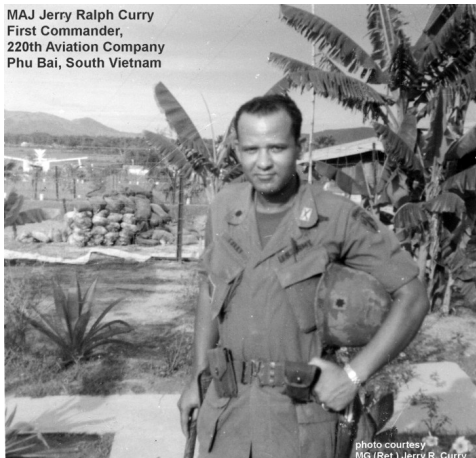
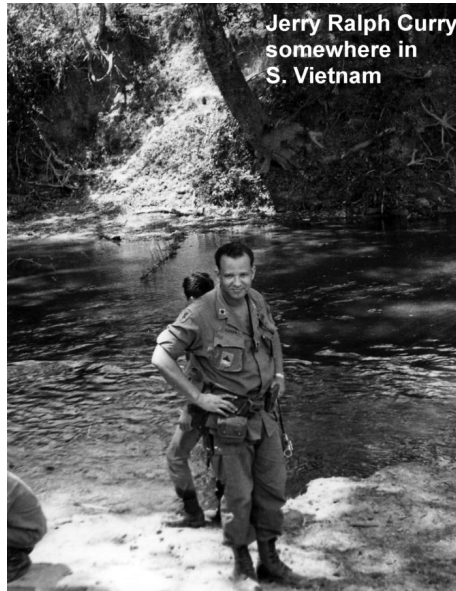
listed, such as population density, and road traffic. Identifiable jungle trails were sketched in as were the location of rope bridges built over swiftly flowing streams and small rivers.

Any changes in the area no matter how slight, were recorded and later collated for intelligence evaluation. Anyone planning a combat operation in the Corps area, U.S. Marine or Vietnamese, first checked with the intelligence center at the 220th.

Some enemy activity required immediate response from artillery, naval gunfire or fighter-bombers. For example, a Catkiller flying with a U.S. Marine observer in the backseat who located an enemy unit, kept it under surveillance until the jets arrived. Then he marked the target with rockets.

The 220th patch was designed by the officers and enlisted men of the company. The "X" on the patch, known as a Saint Andrews Cross comes from my family crest.

The End (Copyright 2003, **Jerry Ralph Curry**, written 18 June 2003). Transcribed by **Dennis Currie**, Assistant Editor.



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