

# BOOK REVIEWS

By VHPA Life member JOHN PENNY

John Penny, a VHPA Life Member, served with A/377 and is semi-retired from his career as a helicopter pilot, and teacher. He lives in Ellensburg, WA, with his beloved wife of 31 years, Janet.

**A HUNDRED FEET OVER HELL** by Jim Hooper is a very intense portrayal of the Army Aviators who flew the O-1 "Bird Dog" for the 220th Reconnaissance Airplane Company, call sign Catkillers. They were also known by some as the "Myth Makers." Although this unit was based at Phu Bai, the AO of its 1st Platoon was in, around, and occasionally over the DMZ; an unfriendly neighborhood to say the least. The story of incredible bravery and sacrifice of the pilots and "back seaters" of this unit and others like them has been lost in the literature of what has become known as "The Helicopter War." The book brings the story of the 220th back to life and engages the reader in their daily struggle to protect the "ground pounders" in Northern I Corps from the NVA under very difficult circumstances.

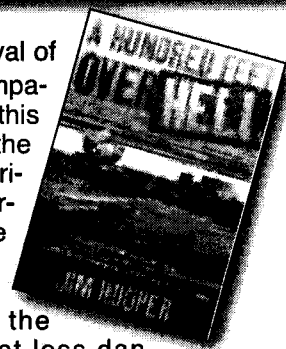
The name of this unit does not tell you anything near the whole story about the Catkillers. To the uninformed the word "reconnaissance" might imply a somewhat less dangerous mission. Not so with the 220th over the highly disputed terrain of the DMZ. Their brand of recon was done "low and slow" and often in the worse kind of weather in aircraft that were an easy target for every weapon in the NVA inventory. A "day at the office" in this outfit usually began with low level spotting of NVA movement and calling in and adjusting artillery. However, unlike their sister units to the south, they were also trained and authorized to call in air strikes which required marking the target at great personal risk. Mix in bad weather, a unit in close contact, and it really gets interesting.

Jim Hooper, when commenting on his book, states that "A Hundred Feet Over Hell must serve as a mere outline of what these men experienced." That may be true but he has done an excellent job of researching and gathering information for this book and interviewing a number of the men who made any unit run, not to mention a high intensity combat unit like the 220th. Jim's brother, Bill Hooper, flew for the 220th on the DMZ. Bill Hooper's last mission for the Catkillers is a most riveting story of survival. He has given voice to those who flew, the men who

maintained their often bullet riddled airplanes, the operations officers, and those in the Direct Air Support Control Center. All of their voices are heard, and so are the voices of the "grunts" for whom this unit flew. The interlacing of their narratives while involved in some of their major engagements makes this a compelling read.

There is an old saying I heard when I first joined the helicopter fraternity: "airplanes fly themselves, helicopters just naturally want to crash." While there may be a grain of truth to this, it hardly applies to those who flew with the 220th and her sister units. Stick, rudder, fabric, skill, hope, and luck kept this unit in the air. A grease mark on the windshield helped them guide the rockets used for marking targets and they weren't above firing their M-16s out the window and dropping hand grenades. Where did they find the men to do this? You know where, just look around at the next VHPA reunion or chapter meeting or...in the mirror.

*A Hundred Feet Over Hell: Flying With the Men of the 220th Recon Airplane Company Over I Corps and the DMZ, 1968-1969 (258 pages, \$25.00) by Jim Hooper, ISBN13: 978-0-7603-3633-5 is available from zenithpress.com, Amazon, and other book suppliers.*



**6000 HOURS:** Book 1 by VHPA member Walter Gutsche is the first part of a very personal memoir of his remarkable career that takes him from high school in New Jersey through 27 years as an Army Aviator, and finally to Boeing Helicopters as a test pilot. Numerous friends and family encouraged him to write his extraordinary story. He has done a great job of putting it together in a straight forward style than informs readers of all backgrounds.

Book 1 takes us through Walter's two Vietnam tours, flying the OH-13S with B Troop 1/9 Cavalry in 66-67 based at An Khe and Chinooks with the 179th ASH Company in 69-70 at Camp Holloway. He brings the men he served with, their missions, and the ways they coped and lived to the page in a way that engages the reader. As he points out in his preface, photographs also tell us stories. The photos are in color and include base camp life, active combat, and many of his fellow pilots.

Walter tells us he wrote his book to answer the question, "What did you do during your life as a helicopter pilot in the Army, Grandpa?" Four years later, he answers that question and shares it with all of us in this stimulating and well written memoir of a proud aviation career. He reports that "Book Deux" is half way written, stay tuned.

*6000 Hours: Book 1 (109 pages with color photos, \$61.99) by Walter W. Gutsche, ISBN13: 978-1-4415-2744-8 is available from Xlibris (a "print on demand" publisher) at [www.xlibris.com](http://www.xlibris.com) or from Amazon.*

