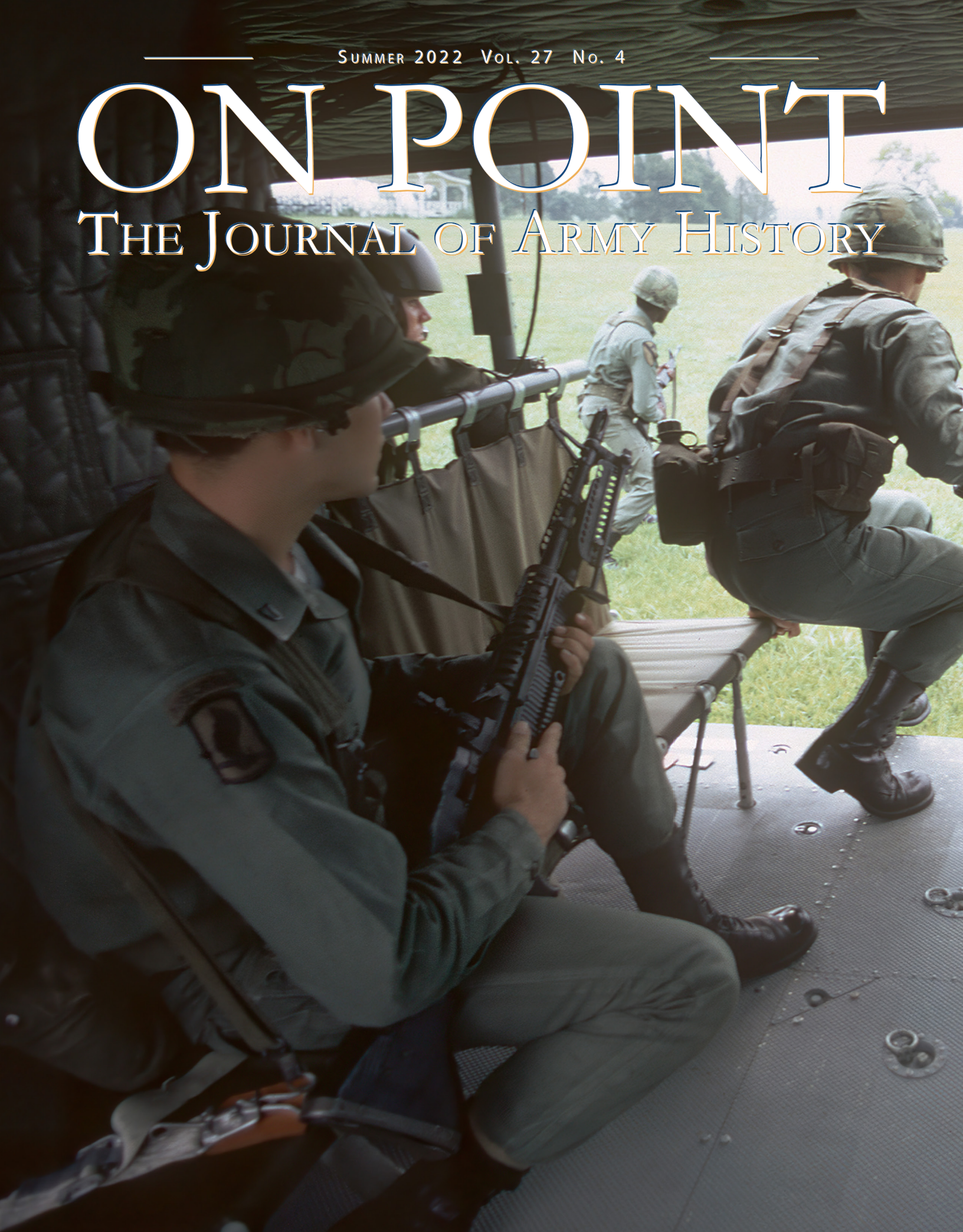


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ON POINT

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220th

AVIATION COMPANY

By Joshua Cline

The U.S. Army used large numbers of aviation assets during the Vietnam War. Though most of these units employed rotary-wing aircraft, a handful flew fixed-wing types. The aviation companies that flew the Cessna L-19/O-1 Birddog had the in-country designation of Reconnaissance Airplane Company (RAC). The pilots and aerial observers of these units performed reconnaissance flights, flew convoy cover, and called in artillery for units on the ground. One of these RACs however, the 220th “Catkillers,” was unique. The 220th had the distinction of flying under U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) operational command for most of the war, and it was uniquely qualified to call in both airstrikes and naval gunfire. It also flew missions into North Vietnam and Laos.

Army fixed-wing aviation got its start in Vietnam in 1962 with the 18th Aviation Company, flying the de Havilland U-1A Otter, and the 73d Aviation Company, Surveillance Airplane Light (SAL), which flew O-1s. In 1965 the 73d was replaced by three new companies: the 74th, 219th, and the 220th. All of these units flew the Birddog, a slow, two-seat plane that cruised at an airspeed of 100 knots (115 miles per hour). The O-1s were equipped with a quartet of 2.75-inch white phosphorus rockets to mark targets. Other rockets used on rare occasions included high explosive or antipersonnel containing 2,000 flechettes. The only other armaments were the personal weapons of the pilot and observer, (usually M16s or CAR-15s) and grenades, primarily smoke grenades, which were dropped out of windows to mark targets when the crew ran out of rockets.

The 220th Aviation Company (SAL) was activated on 31 March 1965 at Fort Lewis, Washington, with Major Jerry Ralph Curry in command. Additional support units would be attached over time, but the 231st Signal Detachment was activated and attached at the onset. By 19 June an

advance party of seven officers and nine enlisted men departed for South Vietnam. The 134th Medical Detachment was attached after the 220th reached Phu Bai.

When the 220th arrived, it was assigned to the 1st and 3rd Marine Divisions in I Corps. The company headquarters at Phu Bai was located just fifty miles south of the DMZ. The Marines, critically short of O-1s with only twelve for all of I Corps, found their UH-1 Iroquois (Huey) helicopters inadequate for the visual reconnaissance role. The Marines used Birddogs for visual reconnaissance, convoy cover, field artillery and naval gunfire adjustment, and tactical air control airborne (TACA) missions. Due to policy agreements with the Air Force, the Army only conducted the first three missions. A request by the Marines for an Army Birddog company to be placed in I Corps to augment their own O-1s coincided with the 220th’s arrival in Vietnam. The company would perform every role the Marines wanted, no matter the policies that limited other fixed-wing Army aviation units. With the limited exception of a handful of pilots from the 21st RAC, and some units flying with Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) observers controlling South Vietnamese aircraft, the 220th was the only Army Birddog unit that could control attack aircraft in direct support of U.S. troops on the ground. The 220th was declared operational on 1 August 1965.

The 220th was under Army chain of command, but under operational control of the 1st and 3rd Marine Divisions. The unit began its Vietnam War tenure as part of the 14th Aviation Battalion under U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). The company was organized into as many as four platoons, dispersed to several airfields, each with its own zone of control.

When the company was declared operational, it had thirty-two O-1s with eight per platoon. The 1st Platoon was based at Quang



The unit insignia of the 220th Aviation Company worn in Vietnam features the unit’s nickname, “Cat Killers,” based on the company’s call sign. (Courtesy of the U.S. Army Aviation Museum).



Captain Raymond G. Caryl stand beside his O-1 Birddog, *Laurel*, at the Marble Mountain Air Facility early in his 1967-68 tour with the 220th in Vietnam. (Courtesy of Raymond G. Caryl)



ABOVE: Two Catkiller crew chiefs work on a Birddog at Marble Mountain. The aircraft is situated within a revetment made with fifty-gallon drums filled with sand to protect it against enemy mortar attacks. (Courtesy Raymond G. Caryl)

ABOVE RIGHT: Caryl pilots his O-1 in a photograph taken by Marine artillery observer First Lieutenant Rob Whitlow. Captain Caryl's CAR-15 is hanging from a hook just above the instrument panel light on the right. Caryl would later comment on his time with the 220th, stating, "I wouldn't trade my year as a Catkiller for a million dollars!" (Courtesy of Raymond G. Caryl)

Ngai to support the ARVN 2d Infantry Division and the USMC enclave at Chu Lai and the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing. 2d Platoon was assigned to Hue (Citadel airfield) supporting the ARVN 1st Infantry Division, the USMC enclave at Phu Bai, and the 3rd Marine Division. The 3d Platoon was based at Da Nang Air Base, eventually moving to Marble Mountain Air Facility, and supported ARVN I Corps Headquarters; the USMC enclave; Headquarters, 3rd Marine Division; Headquarters, 3rd Marine Amphibious Force; and the Quang Nam Special Sector. Lastly, the 4th Platoon was initially detached and reassigned to MACV/Saigon. It eventually became 5th Platoon, 219th Aviation Company, in II Corps at Pleiku until the platoon returned to the 220th. All platoons supported U.S. Special Forces camps scattered throughout I Corps' zone. When the 4th Platoon returned, their aircraft would be deployed to Dong Ha, the northernmost airfield in South Vietnam, just ten miles south of the DMZ.

The call sign and eventual distinctive designation of the "Catkillers" came about on the first flight north to the airfield at Phu Bai, transiting the airspace at Da Nang. Captain Richard "Dick" Quigley was in command of a flight of four Birddogs on 7 July, 1965. Calling Da Nang Approach Control, Quigley used "Army" and the tail number of his Birddog, as was then standard for Army fixed-wing



aviation. The controller asked for an actual call sign, which the 220th did not have. The controller insisted that every unit in Vietnam had a call sign. Thinking quickly, Quigley called back with the name "Catkiller," deciding on it because birddogs kill cats. The call sign stuck and became the name most would know the 220th by.

Soon, the 220th was busy supporting the

Marines, beginning with Operation STARLIGHT, 18-23 August 1965. Lieutenant General Lewis Walt, commanding the 3rd Marine Amphibious Force, would deliver a letter of thanks to the 220th for its support during Operation HARVEST MOON in December 1965; the 220th supported three Marine battalions deployed between Chu Lai and Da Nang with reconnaissance and artillery support. Two members of 1st Platoon were recommended for Navy Commendation Medals in February 1966 for saving several Marine patrols during Operation DOUBLE EAGLE.

The 220th was awarded the Meritorious Unit Commendation for their actions from September 1965 to March 1966. It was reported in the recommendation that Catkiller aircraft were shot at on 549 occasions (an average of two and a half times a day), with 272 hits sustained, eight pilots wounded, and one aircraft shot down. Soon after the battle for the A Shau Special Forces camp (8-12 March) erupted, having begun with the preparing hostile force being spotted by a Catkiller pilot. The Catkillers flew ninety-one sorties during the battle, including a medical evacuation flown by Warrant Officer Ira W. Meisenheimer III. On 10 March during the battle, with an overcast ceiling of 800 feet, the 220th provided forward air control (FAC) services; Air Force FACs did not venture below the clouds. Pilots flew so low that they were shot at by antiaircraft positions situated on the mountains above them. For their efforts, members of the 220th earned two Air Medals with "V," eight Distinguished Flying Crosses, and one Distinguished Service Cross. Two months later in May 1966, the aviators of the 220th were given training by the Air Force and formally authorized to direct air strikes as FACs. The 220th had already been calling in Marine and Navy aircraft as official TACAs. In July 1966, 2d Platoon and Headquarters pilots flew in support of Operation HASTINGS; in September they also flew in support of Operation PRAIRIE.

On 3 September 1966, the 220th was transferred to the 223d Combat Aviation Battalion, 17th Aviation Group, 1st Aviation Brigade. At this time the unit was given their in-country designation of Reconnaissance Air Company (RAC), a designation used solely in Vietnam. All Army O-1 units in Vietnam were designated as RACs. This was likely to avoid confusion with OV-1 Mohawk units, which were designated Surveillance Airplane Companies (SACs). The unit



LEFT: This photograph shows Caryl's O-1 after crash landing at Dong Ha, 12 May 1968. An H-13 Sioux helicopter from the 1st Cavalry Division exploded in midair and tore off the left main landing gear of Caryl's O-1, forcing the crash landing. (Courtesy of Raymond G. Caryl)

RIGHT: After 2d Platoon's Birddogs were destroyed during the Tet Offensive, Catkiller pilots were sent two at a time to Saigon to pick up new aircraft. Captain Caryl took this picture of Captain Bob Domine's Birddog on the return trip to Phu Bai. (Courtesy of Raymond G. Caryl)



was still officially a SAL unit, but RAC was used within the country. During 1966, the 220th flew 22,478 sorties for a total of 28,728 hours, the most in one year during their time in Vietnam.

3d Platoon was honored for their actions 25 April-5 June 1967 by being named as a supporting unit of the 1st Marine Division for a Navy Presidential Unit Citation. The 4th Platoon had to temporarily evacuate from Dong Ha to Phu Bai due to constant mortar attacks 4-9 July, but by 14 August it was decided survival of craft and crew was impossible there, and the platoon permanently relocated to Phu Bai. Exactly one year after the previous transfer, 3 September 1967, the 220th RAC was reassigned from the 223d Aviation Battalion to the 212th Combat Aviation Battalion. 4th Platoon was then honored as a supporting unit of the 3rd Marine Division with a Navy PUC of their own for 20 May-15 September 1967. The 1st Platoon redeployed from Quang Ngai to Phu Bai and Dong Ha just after Christmas 1967. The 21st "Black Aces" RAC had moved to Chu Lai in I Corps, freeing the element to move further north.

4th Platoon returned from the 219th to Dong Ha in late March 1967. Their new mission was adjusting the fire of an Army 175mm gun battalion and as FACs for the Air Force over North Vietnam. These were initially referred to as "Banjo" missions. Banjo missions would be later repeated in 1968 under the name "Tally Ho." These missions flew across the Ben Hai River between South and North Vietnam to attack North Vietnamese Army (NVA) artillery inside of North Vietnam. The Catkillers in their O-1s braved the same anti-air gauntlet as the fast-moving jets who struck targets across the DMZ. At least one Catkiller pilot, Carl Dreschel, was intercepted by an enemy MiG-19, but survived the encounter without a shot fired. Tally Ho missions flew from 3 July to 1 November 1968, when President Lyndon B. Johnson ordered a halt to Operation ROLLING THUNDER.

The 220th's existence as one company spread across multiple airfields meant the unit's platoons each accrued their own awards, often independent of each other or with one other platoon. They and the detachments supporting the Catkillers each were awarded either the Navy NUC or Navy PUC between 1965 and 1967.

The Catkillers distinguished themselves during the Tet Offensive after suffering some setbacks. Enemy forces overran the airfield at the Hue Citadel and destroyed seven of 2d Platoon's eight planes. 2d Platoon was then moved to Phu Bai. On 22 February 1968, during the Battle of Hue, Warrant Officer Terrance M. Bozarth was killed at the controls of his aircraft. His aerial observer, Marine Captain Bob Laramy, took the controls and managed to crash-land the plane, but suffered severe burns and other injuries. The pair of Marine A-4 Skyhawks guided in by Bozarth and Laramy would be credited with killing seventy-three NVA soldiers within 150 meters of the Hue Citadel's wall. At Khe Sanh, Catkillers controlled a number of airstrikes in and around the Marine combat base during the seventy-seven day siege.

In June 1968, 4th platoon was inactivated and merged with 1st Platoon. They were both doing the same job of working with the 3rd Marine Division and the 108th Field Artillery Group. That same month, Catkillers flew operations into Laos supporting the 5th Special Forces Group in Operation PRAIRIE FIRE. From 3-7 July, Catkillers flew 180 Tally Ho missions into North Vietnam in support of Operation THOR, a long-term counter-battery mission against NVA artillery across the Ben Hai River. The results were so successful that Tally Ho missions were extended until November. On 4 August, the Catkillers supported elements of the 101st Airborne Division in Operation SOMERSET PLAIN in the A Shau Valley.

On 25 September 1968, battleship USS *New Jersey* fired her first shots into the DMZ in fire missions called in by the 220th. By then the 220th was known as the "Eyes of I Corps." According to Jim Hooper's book, *A Hundred Feet over Hell*, the 220th soon gained another nickname; "The Eyes of the *New Jersey*."

During the 23-27 October Battle of Kinh Mon, three Catkillers (Charles Finch, Rod Stewart, and Bill Hooper) were each awarded a Silver Star for coming to the assistance of the Army's 1st Battalion, 61st Infantry Regiment (Mechanized). The Catkillers lost a pilot and aerial observer pair (Donald Lee Harrison



RIGHT: The 220th received three Lockheed YO-3A Quiet Star aircraft in late 1970 for night surveillance missions over the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Quiet Star could observe enemy movements in near silence. (Courtesy of Kurt Olney)

and Steven Neil Bezold) on a Tally Ho mission just forty-eight hours before President Johnson's bombing halt went into effect.

On 12 May 1969, the Catkillers' designation was changed to the 220th Aviation Company (Utility Airplane), but in-country everyone still referred to it as an RAC. 4th Platoon was reactivated in September 1969. The following month the 3rd Marine Division pulled out of Dong Ha, and all 220th assets were pulled back to Phu Bai as the northernmost airfield. Nine days later on 12 October, troopers of 2d Squadron, 17th Cavalry, flew as aerial observers, with aerial rocket artillery (ARA) from 4th Battalion, 77th Field Artillery (ARA), of the 101st Airborne Division on call through November.

In late 1969, the 3rd Marine Division left Dong Ha, and the Marines soon departed I Corps. The 220th was no longer allowed to perform as FACs for Air Force aircraft. By this time, the *New Jersey* departed as well, though other ships remained in the area. The Catkillers' unique status as TACAs was stripped from them due to returning to Army operational command, although they continued in the role of adjusting naval gunfire. Sometime during or after 1969, the 59th Signal Detachment (Avionics) replaced the 231st Signal Detachment in supporting the 220th.

Every platoon began 1970 stationed at Phu Bai. The 1st supported 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division, and adjusted naval gunfire of Seventh Fleet operating around Quang Tri Province and the DMZ. 2d and 3d Platoons supported the 101st Airborne Division and ARVN 1st Infantry Division in the A Shau Valley and Thua Thien Province. 4th Platoon supported the 108th Field Artillery Group along the DMZ to the border with Laos. 2d and 3d Platoons were involved throughout the 101st's Airborne's Operation TEXAS STAR, especially the fighting at Fire Support Base Ripcord. Ten Catkillers were awarded Distinguished Flying Crosses for their actions during this period.

From Late June 1970 to early January 1971, three Lockheed YO-3A Quiet Star night reconnaissance aircraft were attached to the 220th RAC. These almost silent, unarmed aircraft flew night observation missions over the Ho Chi Minh Trail. A total of nine


Quiet Stars were deployed to Southeast Asia. None were lost to enemy fire, but three were destroyed in accidents. By the end of 1970, control of the coast and high seas were relinquished to South Vietnam under the Vietnamization program, so Catkiller naval gunfire support missions ended.

1971 began with the 1st and 4th Platoons supporting Operation DEWEY CANYON II/LAM SON 719 over eastern Laos out of Khe Sanh. By late March, the 220th returned to Quang Tri and Dong Hai. Operation LAM SON 720 followed, seeing the 2d and 3d Platoons flying in the A Shau Valley in support of the ARVN 1st Infantry Division. Over the course of the remaining year, the Catkillers would witness units they had supported begin to wind down and prepare to return to the United States. The Catkillers, too, would be part of this. On 26 April 1971, Secretary of the Army Stanley R. Resor approved a request from the 220th Aviation Company to officially get "The Catkillers" as a special designation, authorized by the U.S.

Center of Military History. It is listed as "CATKILLERS" in the Center of Military History's list of special designations.

The 220th began to stand down on 24 November 1971. On 4 December, the 220th's Birddogs left Marble Mountain. The next day all thirty-two aircraft of the 220th took off from Phu Bai. "In our last half hour of ever flying these magnificent airplanes again," wrote R. Brown Cabell, "all hell broke loose and quite a few barrel rolls were observed amongst other unrecognizable aerobatics." Dick Wells commented it was because "the gaggle moved at the pace of the slowest aircraft, therefore, lots of experimenting . . . waiting for everyone to catch up." The 220th Aviation Company ended operations and was inactivated on 26 December 1971.

In its six and a half years in Vietnam, the 220th Aviation Company flew 151,208 hours across 114,652 sorties. In addition to the Presidential Unit Citation (Navy), the 220th was awarded a Meritorious Unit Commendation and two Republic of Vietnam Crosses of Gallantry with Palm. They participated in every campaign of the Vietnam War except for the very first (Advisory) and the very last (Ceasefire). Over the course of the war, Catkillers would be awarded one Distinguished Service Cross, thirteen Silver Stars (at least three of them posthumous), ninety Distinguished Flying Crosses, and a host of other personal decorations.

The Army briefly reactivated the 220th Aviation Company on 16 April 1986 in Ansbach, Germany, as part of the 1st Armored Division, but inactivated it a year and a half later on 16 November 1987. The company remains inactive to this day. 

About the Author

Joshua Cline is a senior at George Washington University majoring in History and an intern/assistant historian at the Army Historical Foundation.