

**TESTIMONIALS—REVIEWS:**  
***A HUNDRED FEET OVER HELL***

**By Jim Hooper**  
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**Testimonials**

Every generation must face tough choices as life unfolds less idyllically than imagined in the protected environment of adolescence or the shelter of a college campus. Those of us who graduated in the late 1960s faced “fight or flight” decisions not unlike those of the World War II and Korean War eras as the conflict in Viet Nam escalated and the nation once again called her sons to war. Some responded with patriotic fervor, some volunteered reluctantly, some took their chances with the draft lottery. Others sought to avoid the obligation all together. Regardless of the how’s and why’s, those who fought in Viet Nam learned about life and death, but most of all about themselves. In the story you are about to read, there is a universal truth: warriors don’t fight for their country or flag, they fight for each other, often going far beyond what their country asks. It was an honor to serve at the same time as these men. This story is about the nation’s best!

**—Lance W. Lord, General, USAF (ret)**

Thank you for your very thoughtful gift about the incredible exploits of your brother and his comrades. The reputation of the FACs, both Army and Air Force endures within the force, believe me. I wish you all the best.

Strength and Honor  
**LTGEN John F. Mulholland**  
**CG U.S. Army Special Operations Command**

Jim Hooper's tribute to his brother Bill, a Bird Dog pilot with the 220th Recon Airplane Company, is a classic story of war and close combat. From hell-raising antics in the clubs and bars to hair-raising combat operations, where death was often only inches away, this is a must read. For those who have never "seen the elephant", this might be hard to understand; those who have will instantly identify with the actions of their fellow warriors. Flying an unarmored aircraft well within the effective range of every enemy weapon on the battlefield to protect the grunts in close combat takes a special breed of heroes. This book chronicles the exploits of such men.

**—Gary L. Harrell, LTGEN, USA (ret)**

A magnificent account of amazing individuals who placed the mission well above their own safety. These men are true heroes and set standards that we maintain today. I have added the title to the Command's reading list as an example of professionalism, dedication, and courage.

**MG Thomas Csrnko**  
**US Army JFK Special Warfare Center and School**

I waited a while to read it, but took your book with me on a trip which would avail me time with no communications to intervene.

Your book helped me pass an entire day without checking my watch or thinking I should do something else. The differing points of view in your story telling made my mind more agile and had me looking for the differences in each character. It also brought back a few memories of my own limited experience in SE Asia. The attitudes of men in combat toward others who are avoiding it was good for me to recall. The vast difference between those who fight and those who only want to look like fighters remains as stark today—and as hard for non-fighters to see at all.

Please give my best to those heroes. Your book did them a good deed, and a great service to those who read it.

**—Rich Comer, MG USAF (ret)**

This is a story about the warrior spirit that has existed in our fighting forces since the birth of our nation. Jim Hooper has nailed this small piece of the Vietnam War as seen through the eyes of the Bird Dog pilots of the 220th Reconnaissance Airplane Company. It is a moving tribute to the men that flew these small aircraft with skill, courage, determination and a whole lot of brass.

**—Mike Seely BG (ret) 74th RAC '65-'66; 245th SAC '68-'69**

Jim Hooper's gripping account of the legendary Catkillers of the 220th Recon Airplane Company once again shows us the spirit and ethos of American warriors. It's about the sheer guts, ingenuity, compassion, and humor of those who serve in defense of freedom. Jim's account is a tribute to the Catkillers...and the thousands who follow in their footsteps...warriors all--old and new!

**—Robert H. Holmes, BG, USAF CCT (ret)**

I flew A-4 Skyhawks out of Chu Lai, and then Bird Dogs with the VMO-6 Fingerprints at Quang Tri for the second half of my tour. [This is] a magnificent job of presenting the deadly environment faced by everyone who flew in I Corps.

**—“Nomad” - Jim Lawrence, LTCOL, USMC (Ret)**

...the Catkillers, flew below the mountain tops, low over the jungle, at night, in monsoon downpours, into the DMZ and even North Vietnam, getting far less notice than their jet brethren or the helicopter pilots who became synonymous with Vietnam. For anyone who wants a great story, who wants to learn about another aspect of the Vietnam War, or wants to read about a hair-raising aviation arena, *A Hundred Feet Over Hell* has it all.

**—Flip Colmer LCDR USN (Ret)**

I find I have to read parts over and over again because my mind fades away as I reminisce. The setting covers so many places I've been - Quang Tri, Dong Ha, Rockpile, Vandergrift (LZ Stud), Con Thien and others. Having been in a grunt unit and in 3rd Force Recon in I Corps, I felt truly a part of the pictures. *A Hundred Feet Over Hell* provided me with a 'verbal flashback' that made me breath harder and brought a tear to my eye. Hooper does a remarkable job of providing the sights and sounds of a unit in trouble.

**—Tom Wilson, USMC  
3<sup>rd</sup> Force Recon**

I commend Hooper for compiling a wealth of information regarding Operation Rich - and confirming my fears of that day. In fact, I felt as though I was reliving it – my heart was pounding in my chest.

**—Tom Coopey, Recon Platoon, 1-61**

Jim Hooper's latest book, *A Hundred Feet Over Hell*, puts you in the cockpit of what could be called one of the most dangerous flying jobs in history: forward air controllers in Vietnam. What makes the book extraordinary is that the pilot Hooper profiles is his brother, and you get a story only a brother could weave, one that gets to the soul of an individual, and has the hairs on the back of your neck standing up.

—Special Operations Warrior Foundation

[The Catkillers] flew Cessna Bird Dogs, slow, unarmored, virtually unarmed, and always within range of a determined enemy. Their mission was directing artillery and air support for Marines and Army personnel in contact with Vietcong and North Vietnamese Army regulars. A lot of missions and a lot of being shot at.

—marines.togetherweserved.com

### **Print reviews of *A Hundred Feet Over Hell***

**DURING 1968 AND 1969**, the author's brother, Bill, served in the U.S. Army flying a Cessna O-1 Bird Dog over the Demilitarized Zone, or DMZ, in Vietnam until he was seriously wounded while flying a mission. After a lengthy hospitalization and rehab, he returned home and told his brother Jim about his experiences and those of the men of the 220th Recon Airplane Company—the Catkillers. An established author and combat reporter, Jim Hooper began gathering documents, facts, and records while locating the men in his brother's unit.

The book narrates the period from Bill Hooper's arrival in the unit as an FNG (a traditional GI vulgarity—one of many terms, some slang, some official, defined in the book's glossary) until the end of his final mission. One note: Copy on the book's jacket states that the book often uses the men's "own words." The author re-creates long conversations enclosed in quotation marks, and skeptical readers will rightly question how, after time has passed, one can recall a lengthy exchange word for word. The technique, now a mainstream practice in non-fiction writing (although not one to be emulated), is untrustworthy. Look past that, though, and you're in for a helluva read.

The DMZ abutted I Corps at the northern border of South Vietnam. Though this was U.S. Marine Corps country, an Army unit provided support for artillery adjustment, recon, and control of air strikes. In the rest of the theater, however, Army O-1 pilots did not act as FACs, or forward air controllers, for air strikes; the Army ran artillery, and the U.S. Air Force FACs ran air strikes. As an added attraction in I Corps, the battleship USS *New Jersey* maintained a constant vigil off the coast during 1968 and 1969 and could be called upon to add nine 16-inch guns to the almost continuous chorus of "Incoming."

Here is where some of the most hair-raising fights of the war erupted. The DMZ had been created by treaty to be a buffer zone between the north and south, but the north simply ignored the rules and occupied the entire area, using it as a storage site for supplying its forces in their forays south. Their allies equipped the North Vietnamese army with some bodacious anti-aircraft firepower—multi-barrel and radar-directed automatic guns ranging up to 57-millimeter cannon. Because the O-1s lacked armor, the aircrew's only defenses were to fly very low over areas with thicker foliage, use the aircraft's light weight and excellent maneuverability to evade the gunners, and hope artillery or an air strike was on its way.

Hooper examines various combat encounters from many points of view to build detailed composite pictures of events. And he delves deeply into the emotions and bonds that held the unit together, recounting amusing afterhours high jinks, the grim humor of wartime, and the washing away of a day's stress in that universal solvent, alcohol.

The best thing about the book is that—conversational re-creations notwithstanding—every page rings true, and with very rare exception, names are named. Writing fearlessly and with an artfulness that few others have managed, Hooper has captured the ironies, the buccaneer’s ethos, and the rhythms of men at war.

Thirty years ago, Robert Mason published *Chickenhawk*, a classic personal account of Vietnam helicopter operations that is still as potent as a satchel charge. I’d rank *A Hundred Feet Over Hell* right up there with it.

#### ***Air & Space/Smithsonian***

GEORGE C. LARSON SERVED AS A MACV (MILITARY ASSISTANCE COMMAND, VIETNAM) ADVISOR IN II CORPS AND FLEW MANY HOURS IN THE BACK SEAT OF AN O-1 IN QUANG DUC PROVINCE.

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Ask any grunt, whether he be Army or Marine, and he will tell you that air support was vital to keeping the enemy at bay. Many battles were won when American aircraft, referred to as ‘fast movers,’ would swing in low and drop their ordnance or napalm, often inciting cheers from the ‘ground pounders’ observing the action.

To achieve maximum accuracy, pilots known as FO’s, or forward observers, would fly at extremely low altitudes in small Cessna O-1 planes called Bird Dogs to observe enemy movements and relay their findings back to the Direct Air Support Center. These brave individuals did a remarkable job under extremely trying circumstances to deliver much-needed air support for those on the ground.

Jim Hooper has written a gutsy account of the ‘Catkillers’ in Vietnam. Their area of operations was in the northernmost section of the country called I Corps. There they dodged Communist anti-aircraft and rifle fire. They did an extraordinary job of controlling air strikes for both Marine and Army outfits combating North Vietnamese Army forces crossing into South Vietnam via the DMZ.

An interesting addition to the book is the epilogue explaining what became of each pilot after his return stateside. Each individual has enjoyed great success in his respective endeavors, and many have commented how rewarding their tour of duty was with the Catkillers. The positive remarks by these Vietnam veterans help combat the perpetual myth that all who served there came home either a drug addict or a crazed killer. Hooper deserves a big thank you from Vietnam vets for writing this book and relating how these aviators served honorably during an unpopular conflict.

***Military Heritage, February 2010***

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With today’s technology of satellite imagery, global positioning and unmanned aerial systems (UAS), Jim Hooper reminds us that in Vietnam reconnaissance was performed by real-live aviators flying low-level over enemy positions. From their vantage point above the battlefield, the Army pilots reported the current situation to friendly small unit commanders who were leading their formations in close combat with the enemy. These young pilots and their observers, performing missions along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), frequently flew through heavy anti-aircraft fire from Soviet-built air defense weapons.

The Vietnam War usually evokes images of air assault missions employing turbine-engined helicopters. However, the 220<sup>th</sup> Recon Airplane Company (RAC), highlighted in this book, used the Cessna O-1 Bird Dog, a small, single-engined, propeller-driven, fixed-wing aircraft. These slow airplanes could stay in the air longer than helicopters before refueling. Armed only with marking rockets, these dedicated aircrews remained on station, providing valuable information to ground forces.

One recurring mission for the 220<sup>th</sup> RAC, which used the tactical callsign “Catkiller,” was counter-battery operations against North Vietnamese Army (NVA)

field artillery. The NVA batteries fired 130mm guns and 152mm howitzers across the border into the friendly base at Dong Ha. The enemy frequently moved their field pieces at night and fired from new locations the next day. When the incoming artillery impacted at Dong Ha, Catkiller aircrews would climb into their Bird Dogs and immediately take off while the airstrip was under attack. Flying north, the aviators would be given a general location derived from crater analysis. (The crater analysis was performed by brave soldiers, back at Dong Ha, who would run out and measure the directional alignment of the hole just made by enemy artillery.) The aircrews performed visual reconnaissance until they could observe and pinpoint the actual enemy firing positions in North Vietnam.

Once the enemy batteries were visually identified, the Catkillers adjusted friendly artillery from batteries in the south, firing 105mm, 155mm, or eight-inch howitzers, or 175mm guns, to destroy or silence the deadly NVA artillery. Often, the Soviet-built weapons in the North could out-range the friendly weapons returning fire from the south. When American artillery could not reach the enemy targets, the 220<sup>th</sup> aircrews resorted to adjusting naval gunfire from warships located off the coast of North Vietnam. Being trained and certified forward air controllers (FACs), the Catkillers also directed lethal air strikes from Marine Corps, Navy and Air Force attack aircraft coordinated by the Marine Corps Direct Air Support Center at Dong Ha (Dong Ha DASC).

Catkiller missions into North Vietnam could last three hours or more with the aircrews exposed to hostile air defense fires. The pilots learned to bob and weave. As Hooper describes it, the pilots would “make radical course changes while climbing and descending” (p46) to make it more difficult for enemy gunners to find their mark. Employing Soviet-made, radar-assisted, anti-aircraft guns, the highly-trained NVA crews fired at the Bird Dogs as soon as they flew within range, often while the Catkillers were still over South Vietnam.

Hooper’s style of writing quickly catches the reader’s interest. Much better organized and edited than most unit histories, Hooper’s book is highly descriptive. This is an account of close-up war fighting. It is a book about young aviators performing their missions in frail airplanes who withstood terrifying experiences on a daily basis. Pilots tell, in their own words, how they managed to cope with the situation and took off every morning, well aware that the enemy was waiting for them,

**Denis L. Dolan, Ph.D.**  
***On Point* magazine**

**U.S. Army Command and General Staff College**

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**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 220<sup>th</sup> 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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 backseaters of this unit and others like them have been lost in the literature of what has come to be known as “The Helicopter War.” The book brings the story of the 220<sup>th</sup> back to life and engages the reader in their daily struggle to

protect the “ground pounders” in northern I Corps from the NVA in 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 220<sup>th</sup> over the highly disputed terrain of the DMZ. Their brand of recon was done “low and slow” and often in the worst kind of weather in aircraft that were easy targets for every weapon in the NVA inventory. A “day at the office” in this unit usually began with low-level spotting of the NVA 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 this 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 men who make any unit run, not to mention a high intensity unit like the 220<sup>th</sup>. Jim’s brother, Bill Hooper, flew for the 220<sup>th</sup> on the DMZ. Bill Hooper’s last mission 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 their voices are heard, and so are the voices of the “grunts” for whom this unit flew. The interlacing of their views 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 220<sup>th</sup> 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.

**John Penny – Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association**

The “Catkillers” of the 220<sup>th</sup> RAC flew what could very arguably be the most dangerous sustained combat mission profiles of any aircrews during the Vietnam War. Their vulnerable old O-1 Bird Dogs belonged to a long-ago era, yet were pressed into service to provide the eyes for the fast-movers and artillery carrying the high explosives and napalm to the enemy. Having flown over the Ho Chi Minh Trail with both Walts and Pterodactyls from the 19<sup>th</sup> TASS and 185<sup>th</sup> RAC, I was projected back in time by this narrative, right down to the sweat under my helmet and the fear in the pit of my stomach.

The Catkillers had a small AO compared with others, only about 60 miles by 20 miles, but it included the very dangerous I Corps and DMZ and they frequently flew into North Vietnam as well. Piloting single-engine near-antique

airplanes over some of the most heavily defended ground ever in the history of warfare is the definition of guts.

Author Jim Hooper has captured the essence of what his brother Bill, Catkiller 12, and his fellow pilots and airborne observers had to overcome in terms of the enemy, fickle weather, very rudimentary avionics and sometimes unenlightened leadership to carry the war to a capable and determined enemy. The book is a collection of vignettes from a number of the Catkillers, sometimes relating near-death events in air/ground combat and sometimes doing not-so-smart things in the air to break the boredom that comes with war. It is at times gritty, often intensely personal, and always exceptionally readable. There is humor, angst, destruction and death at a very visceral level, written with an obvious passion.

This is a very good book and perhaps a better story, following the participants into their post-Vietnam lives and with their insights given from the clear perspective of looking back in time. This is a "must-read" for those with an interest in the Vietnam War.

.....**Colonel Larry Mayes, USAF (Ret)** - *Military Review* magazine.....

For Lieutenant Peter van Haren, leader of 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon, C Company, 61<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment (Mechanized), October 25, 1968, was memorably scary, even in the Con their area. His men were pinned down, sizeable North Vietnamese forces were massing on his flanks, three of his tanks were disabled by mines, and bad weather seemed to limit any reliable air support. But flying overhead was a Cessna O-1 Bird Dog of the 220<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Airplane Company, performing Forward Air Controller duties and more.

"Most of the time in combat, things are happening too fast or, if you're a leader, you're too busy to be scared," he recalled. "But this time, as the FAC kept telling me how many, how well armed and how close the enemy was, it was freaking me out. We needed the info, but every tidbit made it harder for me to keep the pedal down.

"And then they started shooting at him," Van Haren added. "Amazingly, he didn't peel off but hung right in there and kept directing us. As is true with many heroic actions in combat, he inspired us to keep hammering forward, even though the incoming firer was getting heavier. That guy had some real guts."

Such comments might have been made for any of the low and slow-flying Bird Dog crews that flew close tactical reconnaissance and called in artillery and air strikes for beleaguered grunts or even swooped in to fire their own white phosphorus rockets or (as in this case) fire M16s out the side doors at the enemy below. What made the 220<sup>th</sup> Recon Airplane Company's job a bit more challenging was that it operated in I Corps at the Demilitarized Zone, where the opposition was less often the Viet Cong that it was NVA, with a wide, nasty array of return fire ranging from 7.62mm AK-47s on full automatic, to 57mm anti-aircraft artillery emplaced just north of the DMZ.

War correspondent Jim Hooper was inspired to write *A Hundred Feet Over Hell* by the experiences shared, somewhat reluctantly, by his brother, Bill

Hooper, who had been wounded in action while serving with the 220<sup>th</sup> – AKA the Catkillers. In the course of his research, however, he assembled an extensive collection of memories from members of that unit and the ground troops, Army and Marines, that they supported, to construct a gripping blow-by-blow narrative of desperate actions so numerous as to become almost routine to the men who fought there. Though not a comprehensive unit history, Hooper's chronicle preserves a lot of first-hand accounts that might otherwise be lost. In addition to covering both the intensity and terror of a tour of duty in the DMZ, these include many of the lighter memories in a unit that, by virtue of the extraordinary circumstances, indulged in the sort of between-combat shenanigans summed up by member Jim Hudson: "The thing is that the 220<sup>th</sup> was not *like* M\*A\*S\*H, it *was* M\*A\*S\*H!"

Jon Guttman – *Vietnam Magazine*

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## Summer reads

By [Bill Thompson \(Contact\)](#)  
*The Post and Courier*  
Sunday, June 7, 2009

"A Hundred Feet Over Hell" by Jim Hooper (May, Zenith Press/Quayside Publishing): Hooper, a war correspondent, relates the compelling story of veteran and pilot Edward Miler of Summerville and his fellow aviators in Vietnam. The book recounts harrowing combat missions flown by Miler and others in their Cessna Bird Dogs over the DMZ, one of history's deadliest combat zones, helping to save the lives of countless U.S. ground troops during their tour.

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## **Dangerous, But Necessary: Reconnaissance pilot during Vietnam War tells story of how he saved American lives**

Edgar "Doc" Clement was awarded two Distinguished Flying Crosses for his service as a reconnaissance pilot during the Vietnam War.

By Kim Underwood JOURNAL REPORTER Published: October 28, 2009

BERMUDA RUN - As a "Catkiller" in Vietnam, Edgar "Doc" Clement's job was to get reconnaissance teams on the ground in the demilitarized zone out of trouble.

When a radio call came in from American soldiers who were in trouble, he would fly his single-engine Cessna 0-1 Bird Dog to their location and, by radio, direct artillery fire and the F-4 jets that would drop bombs and napalm on enemy locations.

The mission might include not only subduing the enemy but also the destruction of foliage and other impediments to create a path to a spot clear enough for a helicopter to fly in and pick up the soldiers.

It was incredibly dangerous work. A mission might last a couple of hours, and, during that entire time, he had to fly his relatively slow-moving airplane at altitudes as low as



100 feet, which meant that the unarmored plane could be shot down by rifle fire from the ground.

"It was nuts," Clements said.

But necessary, he said. "That's what we did trying to save American lives."

Jim Hooper, the author of a book about Clement and the other members of the 220th Airplane Reconnaissance Company, emphasized how dangerous the work was by pointing out that the helicopters coming in to pick up soldiers might be under direct fire for two minutes, and the jets for even less time.

"These guys, whenever they flew, they were being shot at," Hooper said.

Clement, 64, was awarded two Distinguished Flying Crosses. He arrived in Vietnam in 1968 as a first lieutenant and, after extending his tour for six months, left 1½ years later as a captain. For the first 12 months, he was stationed about 15 miles south of the demilitarized zone in Ha Dong. His adventures during that time are central to Hooper's *A Hundred Feet Over Hell: Flying with the Men of the 220th Recon Airplane Company Over I Corps and the DMZ, Vietnam 1968-1969* (Zenith Press, \$25). Hooper, who lives in London, has extensive experience as a war correspondent and has written other nonfiction books and a number of articles about wars throughout the world. His interest in writing about the 220th can be traced to his brother, Bill, being a member of the company.

During the 10-year process of getting everyone's stories together and verifying information for the book, which was published earlier this year, Clement and Hooper became friends.

Earlier this week, after a book-signing at the Smithsonian Institution, Hooper headed south to visit Clement at the Bermuda Run home that he shares with his wife, Brenda.

Clement grew up in Winston-Salem.

He has the same name as his father so some sort of nickname was inevitable, he said, and the "Doc" from Bugs Bunny's line "What's up, Doc?" was what stuck.

He was a running back at Northwest High School (now Northwest Middle), and after graduating in 1963 he went to Austin Peay State University in Tennessee on a football scholarship. He dropped out after a year, and in April 1966 the Army drafted him.

Clement has a taste for adrenalin, and after being discharged from the Army he headed to Alaska, where he spent eight years flying in areas where airstrips were rare and he routinely had to search for clearings long enough to land.

After that, he became a pilot for Piedmont (now US Airways) and retired in 2005.

kunderwood@wsjournalcom

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## **New book recalls 'Catkillers' over Vietnam**

*by Frank Graham (North Platte Bulletin) - 5/7/2009*

Strapped into the seat of the Cessna L-19, the 24-year-old pilot felt more fear than he'd ever felt before. He was flying the flimsy plane at only 800 feet and at speeds below 120 mph.

It was the young pilot's first flight over the Demilitarized Zone in South Vietnam in 1966, the deadliest battlefields in modern history.

Below him North Vietnamese soldiers were locked in a firefight with American soldiers. They North Vietnamese were shooting at his plane too. It was the pilot's job to direct fighter jets into the battle and identify and mark their targets.

It was a long way from New Prague Minnesota for Mike Sharkey.

Sharkey is one of a number of pilots featured in a new book about the 220th Recon Airplane Company called "A Hundred Feet Over Hell."

The pilots were forward air controllers and were acknowledged as having one of the most dangerous aviation roles in the wars. Their work was critical in finding and stopping the enemy before they could attack American troops and supporting those troops with artillery and air strikes when the fight was on.

One of many "Bird Dog" units in Southeast Asia, none operated in as hostile and environment as the "Catkillers" of the 220th Reconnaissance Airplane Company.

Jim Hooper wrote the book, published by Zenith Press in Minneapolis. Hooper is the brother of Bill Hooper, another Catkiller pilot who served with Sharkey.

Sharkey, the manager of the North Platte Airport, today has more than 7,000 hours flying time.

But in 1966, he had graduated from St. John's University with an ROTC commission and had just completed Army Flight School.

Sharkey trained on the Cessna L-19, nicknamed the Bird Dog. It had a 213 horsepower flat-six piston engine. Its maximum speed was 151 mph but was mostly flown around 120 mph.

The plane, an unsung aircraft with a proud military heritage, had two underwing pylons for mixed stores of smoke canisters and "Willie-Pete," the nickname the pilots had for the white phosphorus marking rockets used to mark targets.

The Defense Department ordered 3,200 L-19s that were built between 1950 and 1959. The aircraft were used in various utility roles such as artillery spotting, front line communications, medevac and training.

In 1962, the Army L-19 was redesignated the O-1 (Observation) Bird Dog and entered its second war in Vietnam. During the early 1960s the Bird Dog was flown by South Vietnamese airmen, US Army aviators and clandestine Ravens aircrews.

In 1964, the Department of Defense issued a memorandum directing that the U.S. Army turn over its Bird Dogs to the US Air Force, while the army began its transition to a "rotor-wing" force, helicopters.

The U.S. Army was allowed to retain some O-1 Bird Dogs for artillery observation, spotting, forward air control until the new army helicopters entered service.

In 1964, the Catkillers of the 220 Reconnaissance Airplane Company were born.

Sharkey said no one knows exactly how the Catkillers got their name but he heard a rumor that an early pilot with the company once killed a tiger in the jungle from the air.

In 1966, Sharkey was assigned to the Company.

Their mission was to fly low over the DMZ and provide support to ground troops. They also flew other missions such as mail delivery and convey support.

The young pilots took extraordinary risks to support their brothers-in-arms on the ground.

Captain Sharkey recalled the fear of flying his first mission over the Z.

"I was assigned a crusty, old observer, Major Mulkey, in my back seat," Sharkey said. "As we flew over a mountain and into the valley, I could see the fighter jets on their bombing runs – napalm and bombs exploding everywhere."

"And above it all, a single Cessna directing traffic," Sharkey said. "He was the Catkiller we were replacing."

Sharkey said he could hardly swallow and that fear "took on a new meaning that day."

Taking his place over the battlefield, Sharkey was on his first full combat mission.

After Mulkey briefed the fighter-bombers, Sharkey made two rocket runs to mark the targets.

Instead, he had two misfires. He pressed the button that should have launched the rockets but neither fired.

As he gained altitude to try it again, he heard Mulkey over the radio.

"Well, Captain Sharkey, we now know the intercom works," Mulkey said. "If you would squeeze the right switch up there, we can get on with this war."

Sharkey said he flew two four hour missions a day, three days in a row, then got a day off. He led a platoon of seven other pilots.

The missions were dangerous. Of the 28 pilots in the Company, they lost four Catkillers in a year. He said that took a toll on the other pilots.

The Catkillers flew at treetop level much of the time and regularly took gunfire from the enemy below.

Sharkey said his plane once got hit 33 times by gunfire during a single mission.

Sharkey received two Distinguished Flying Crosses.

The Distinguished Flying Cross is awarded to any person who, while serving in any capacity with the Armed Forces of the United States, distinguishes himself by heroism or extraordinary achievement while participating in aerial flight. The performance of the act of heroism must be evidenced by voluntary action above and beyond the call of duty.

On both occasions Sharkey's flying skills and bravery were noted.

But he said the mission he was the most proud of occurred out of the blue one day. He said he was "nosing around the foothills about five miles north of Camp Carroll."

Suddenly he was under fire from a new anti aircraft site. He flew away from the site as fast as possible and formulated a plan. Knowing the fighters were vulnerable to the anti aircraft guns, 50-calibers, Sharkey scrambled a Da Nang flight of fighters. Then he tried something he had never tried before.

Waiting for the F-4s to arrive, Sharkey said he flew down to Camp Carroll and took a magnetic heading to the target then flew back and took a position 90 degrees and a mile away from the target.

When the fighters arrived, Sharkey directed them to the tin roofs of Camp Carroll and gave them the heading to the target. He then marked the target at the very last second and had the fighters drop their napalm and bombs.

Sharkey said his plan went off "like a dream."

"The gooks were concentrating on me and didn't even know the fighters were in the area until it was too late," Sharkey said. "I don't think they ever got a shot off."

But not all the missions were so exciting.

Sharkey recalled being on a solo reconnaissance mission when he got a radio message to proceed to a place in the foothills and destroy all the water buffalo there.

"Apparently some tactical genius, probably a West Point grad, had determined that they were potential pack animals and had to be killed," Sharkey said.

Sharkey flew to the spot and discovered about 200 water buffalo grazing around an enormous water hole. He said with much pleasure he called in an artillery mission on a spot about five miles away and single-handedly blew out about one square mile of jungle.

Sharkey also recalled the time he landed exhausted after a late night mission. He had only used one rocket that day. He said he parked the aircraft next to the fuel pit and went to bed.

After refueling the next morning, he said he cranked up, turned the airplane toward the portable air traffic control tower and called for takeoff clearance.

"Problem was, I had left the overhead switch armed and had not replaced the trigger safety," Sharkey said. "As I keyed the microphone button, I squeezed the trigger and fired a rocket right past the tower."

Sharkey said the two guys in the tower hastily evacuated the tower thinking they were under rocket attack – which, in a way, he guessed they were.

They finally figured out it was Sharkey who fired the rocket and radioed him and asked him what he thought he was doing.

Sharkey said he was going to take off then and if that rocket hit any friendlies, his family could reach him through a North Vietnamese postal address.

Sharkey also used to fly mail and cold beer to the small base camps. He said he'd make a low pass, hold the stick between his knees and throw the goodies out the window.

Shortly after they had installed smoke grenade holders outside of the planes to help the fighters find us when they came on station, Sharkey made a mail run to a base camp near Khe Sanh.

"When I tossed the mail bag out it got caught on the grenade holder, opened, and spewed letter and parcels all over the camp's mine field,"

Sharkey said. "Needless to say, I was not the most popular guy after that and didn't return for awhile, for fear of being shot down by the inhabitants."

### **The book**

These and other stories about Sharkey and the other Catkiller pilots can be found in the book.

Hooper interviewed numerous other pilots and the infantrymen who relied on them.

The book is rife with examples of indescribable courage and bravery of our armed forces in the Vietnam-Laos Wars. It also describes the young men's wild lifestyles on their days off.

Understanding the men who flew the Bird Dog as forward air controllers is as touching as it is exciting.

Often called "the toughest little dogs in the fight," the pilots who flew the Cessna L-19 saved countless lives and heaped terror on the enemies from above.

### **Sharkey departs**

Sharkey left the Catkillers after a year and was reassigned to fly VIPs out of Bangkok.

Sharkey then took an assignment in Germany then transitioned to flying helicopters.

While flying a reserve unit from Birmingham Ala., Sharkey survived a helicopter crash near Hattiesburg Miss.

After getting his 737 rating using the G.I. Bill, Sharkey flew for several companies.

While working for a company out of Panama, he received a request to fly General Manuel Noriega, military dictator of Panama from 1983 to 1989, to Havana Cuba.

Noriega's daughter had been kidnapped by Cuban terrorists and he wanted to fly to Havana to negotiate her release.

"This is an American registered aircraft," Sharkey said to the government worker. "We can't land in Cuba."

"Call your consulate," the man said.

Sharkey said he did and, sure enough, it had already been arranged.

So Sharkey flew the dictator to Cuba and ended up doing it about five times. He said his mother was convinced that he worked for the CIA but just never told anyone.

Sharkey eventually formed an aviation consultant company and trained the entire airport staff at the Ciskei Airport in South Africa. He said his company trained the first eight black air traffic controllers in South Africa and the first 12 meteorologist forecasters.

Sharkey took the job as airport manager in North Platte in 1999 to be closer to his family. He has since married and said it looks like he is here to stay.

***The North Platte Bulletin - Published 5/7/2009***

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Jim Hooper was the owner/operator of the infamous Z'hills in the '70s and '80s. But 'Hoop' had a passion for journalism, and in '84 left to become a war correspondent and author. His fifth book, *A Hundred Feet Over Hell*, is definitely a story worth telling and worth reading.

If you like Stephen Ambrose's books, you'll love *A Hundred Feet Over Hell*. Hoop taps into the passion shared by his Bill and his fellow 'Catkiller' pilots of the 220<sup>th</sup> Recon Airplane Company, who flew unarmed 100mph Cessna Bird Dogs over the most deadly real estate of the Vietnam War. Circling low overhead, they directed fire from fighter-bombers and stayed to direct the rescue of our soldiers – who many times were pinned down by NVA and would never have made it without the Catkillers.

Charlie Brown, D-6386  
Golden Knight RW Team '87-'90, '94-'00  
*Parachutist Magazine*

.....

THE VILLAGES There is still pride in Sarge Means' voice as he talks about his time flying in Vietnam with the aviators of the 220th Recon Airplane Company, otherwise known by their call sign, the 'Catkillers.' Flying in the flimsy two-seat, propeller-driven Cessna O-1 Bird Dogs, the Catkillers had the dangerous job of forward observers, patrolling I Corps and the Demilitarized Zone in the northernmost combat zone in South Vietnam. They were there to keep an eye on the DMZ and watch out for any enemy troops coming south that might engage American soldiers on the ground. They found and stopped the enemy before they could attack, and they supported the men on the ground by calling in artillery and air strikes once a battle began. 'We were called the eyes of I Corps,' Means, a resident of the Village of Sabal Chase, said. Few people know the story of the Catkillers, but many soldiers owed their lives to the brave flights made by those heroic pilots. It is a story that is finally being told through the efforts of Jim Hooper, a war correspondent, author, and brother to Catkiller Bill Hooper. Not willing to allow people to forget the Catkillers, Hooper has written a book told from the point-of-view of the Catkillers themselves, titled 'A Hundred Feet Over Hell.'-'My initial goal was to chronicle his (Bill's) experiences, though I didn't feel qualified to do so until seeing combat as a freelance journalist 20 years later,' Hooper said. 'Not long after I started prompting him for his memories, it became glaringly obvious that I couldn't tell his story without including the men he flew with.' Searching for other members of the Catkillers became Hooper's mission, and in what he describes as a eureka moment, he finally got in touch with Means. Through Means, Hooper then was able to connect with other Catkillers and even an infantryman who credited Bill with saving his life during an intense battle. 'Jim called me. I was assigned at Fort Rucker, Alabama at the time about 15 years ago, and he said

he was writing a book,' Means recalled. 'That started a chain reaction. It kind of snowballed from there.' Slowly, Hooper was able to get the Catkillers to share their memories. He said he wanted to use the voices of the men themselves to tell the story because it was the only way to really get across to readers what it meant to be a Catkiller. 'Combat is an intensely personal phenomenon; each participant sees and remembers it from a unique perspective and with a unique voice,' Hooper explained. 'To homogenize their recollections in the third person would have stripped them of that uniqueness. I felt it important to establish each character in his own words.' Means said he was impressed at how the book definitely captured what it meant to be a Catkiller. 'For those of us that were over there, it was just as if we were back there, back in the cockpit flying the missions,' Means said. In 'A Hundred Feet Over Hell,' Hooper recounts some of the Catkillers' most memorable missions, but he also focuses on another aspect of the men who made up the unit lifelong bonds that came from fighting together. 'Despite the war, it was the camaraderie we had, the love for one another, the sharing. I've always felt that. It was special,' Means said. The book also serves as a confirmation of the importance of what Means and his comrades did in Vietnam. The story of their contribution was something Hooper said he didn't want to see disappear with time. 'The Catkillers flew the most dangerous missions of any army Bird Dog unit in Vietnam, yet nothing had been written about them. If I could ensure that they weren't forgotten, then I had a responsibility to do so,' Hooper said.

Daily Sun, August, 2009

### Amazon Customer Reviews

#### [A Hundred Feet Over Hell: Flying With the Men of the 220th Recon Airplane Company Over I Corps and the DMZ, Vietnam 1968-1969](#)

5.0 out of 5 stars **Put this one on the shelf with Studs Terkel's great oral histories.**, April 30, 2014 By [Lorenzo](#) -

Just finished reading 'A Hundred Feet Over Hell' by Jim Hooper, which I hereby give my 'Best Book of the Year So Far Award'. A fabulous read for anyone interested in Vietnam War history and small airplanes. No sexy jets for these guys, but one of Wichita's finest, a Cessna tail dragger capable of maybe 100 knots, with a 200 hp piston engine - virtually unarmed (well, a set of white phosphorus rockets intended for marking targets) flying at the front lines of a s\*\*\*ty war. What makes this book such a great reading experience is how the stars aligned: 1) Bill Hooper, the older brother flying Cessna O-1 Birddogs in the DMZ,

late 1960s, returns home seriously wounded; 2) Teenage younger brother Jim goes on to become a war correspondent of high repute; 3) Access by Jim to brother Bill and former 'Catkiller' pilots at reunions. The end result is absolutely top shelf, deserving a place next to the oral histories of the great Studs Terkel. Funny. Poignant. Awe inspiring. Deeply moving. And sometimes, truly breathtaking to read.

5.0 out of 5 stars **Great Book**, April 6, 2014

By [Bill](#) -

I found the book to be very interesting. Great bunch of Americans! Too bad aviation isn't like that now. This is case where simple relatively inexpensive technology in conjunction with the intuitiveness and intelligence of the human being worked well together!

5.0 out of 5 stars **RVN Bird Dog Pilot**, February 25, 2014

By [Lee Morgan](#) -

I flew Dogs out of Pleiku and Kontum '68 - '69.

Reading this book took me back to my time in Hell. I seldom saw 100 feet except in route to a designated area or on a radio relay mission. Most RAC and FAC pilots lived on the ragged edge, never knowing if they would make it home in one piece. We lost six pilots and their observers during my tour and two more crews within months of my DEROS. We also had crews rescued by members of 52nd AVN Bn. and other Units in our AO. Thank you for helping our Brothers return home.

Jim Hooper depicts our role in support of ground troops in such detail and clarity that I set the book aside several time to reflect on my personal experiences in Vietnam. Reliving those days is not an enjoyable experience.

That being said, Mr. Hooper honors the memory of all L-19 pilots, our crews, the men crazy enough to ride with us, and our wonderful Dawgs that we rode into battle.

He portrays the individual with humility and, at times, humor. Using input from many sources from the Catkillers and supported Units' members, Jim Hooper brings to life the real story of the 220th RAC and their mission.

4.0 out of 5 stars **A story about something that you may not have known existed.**, January 23, 2014 By [Paul D. McDaniel](#)

["Microjedi"](#) (Raleigh, NC) -

What's it like flying a small propeller aircraft over a war in Vietnam? Read this book to find out. Soldiers never cease to amaze me. The things that these brave men did during these wars is sometimes mind boggling. This book is a good read that shows how these guys were



willing to do sometimes crazy things to save a fellow soldier. Forward Air Control is not exactly a glamorous job, but these guys saved lives every day.

5.0 out of 5 stars **A great book about great heros.**, November 30, 2013 By [Barbara Ferguson "scrappingBAW"](#) (North Carolina) - This book is partially about a high school classmate of my husband and he was glued to every word. I have never seen him so involved in a book before. A great book about great heros.

5.0 out of 5 stars **Outstanding heroism and courage of the FAC**, November 21, 2013 By [George Hanks](#) - It really demonstrated the extreme bravery of the FAC's and their absolute desire to protect the troops. Great flying stories.

2.0 out of 5 stars **Author Missed 1st MIBARS Air Photography Missions with the 220th RAC**, November 5, 2013 By [John T. Nichols](#) - The author completely missed the many 1st Military Intelligence Battalion (Air Reconnaissance Support), 45th MID/Det E (1st MIBARS) air photography missions flown with the 220th RAC in support of many units and agencies throughout Upper I Corps including the DMZ, Khe Sanh, and the A Shau Valley from 1967 to 1972. These missions provided valuable intelligence in support of active operations in Upper I Corps. I know because I was one of those 1st MIBARS members who participated in these air photography missions. Their omission does an injustice to those who participated both with the 1st MIBARS and the 220th RAC.

5.0 out of 5 stars **A Bird's Eye View of the Vietnam War**, March 24, 2013 By [Paul R. Snell](#) (Lexington, NC United States) - You want to know what the Vietnam War was like? In this book you get a close-up view in one of the most highly contested areas closest to the DMZ. The book is well written and/or composed by Jim Hooper, a war correspondent and brother of one of the main characters in the story. It's providential that this story has been told thanks to Jim Hooper and his outstanding skills as a writer. While he provides the narrative, he allows the participants to speak for themselves. It would seem that many of the actual participants in this combat story are good writers themselves. Or shall we call them "Thespians" or great actors? U b the judge. My thanks to Jim Hooper for being a great brother. My thanks to Bill Hooper for playing your part so very well. I most enjoyed Bill Hooper's time and encounter with the formidable Gypsy Rose Lee. Also, the candid comments, reflections, and confessions of all the players.

3.0 out of 5 stars **Interesting, Informative**, March 13, 2013

By [C. Lum](#) (Honolulu, Hawaii USA) -

This book was difficult to read. It is a collection of FAC pilots who flew in I Corps. It is structured and reads like a reunion of veteran's gathered in a circle recalling the old days. The book read like a collection of pilots first hand stories of the days they fought together. The events described attempt to be chronological but each character writes his short story.

This made the book frustrating to read because there's a lack of a central character. Though there are real battles and events fought, each pilot did fight a violent war. I applaud their contributions and sacrifice they made as well as mourned the loss of their comrades.

5.0 out of 5 stars **back seat AO**, February 21, 2013

By [AO 82nd Airborne](#) -

I was fortunate enough to fly with the "Catkillers" 2nd platoon out of Phu Bai in 68, so for me reading Jim Hooper's book a "Hundred Feet Over Hell" was like traveling back in time. The events and missions of these brave pilots is described in vivid detail. The combat detail is so well written that when the Veterans Administration denied me "combat status" for my disability claims, I introduced the book as "Exhibit A" in my hearing before the Board of Veterans Appeal. The VBA then granted me my "combat Status". Thank you Jim Hooper.

5.0 out of 5 stars **Low and Slow: Target practice for the NVA/VC**, February 11, 2013 By [J. Sandoval Jr. "Blackcoat"](#) (Nevada)

As an Aerial Observer USMC I flew the back seat of the O1 Bird Dog with the 220th out of Marble Mtn in 1968. Also did some flying into Phu Bai. Outstanding, well written and all truth. Gut wrenching and memorable incidents awakened. Now, 44 years later as I read the events the smell of Av Gas and cordite is still here with me. Read it and wept for those that were lost.

3.0 out of 5 stars **A hundred feet over hell**, January 31, 2013

By [Robbiem](#) -

As an RAAF Vietnam Vet I had a close association with some of the FACs operating in our AO and have a high regard for their dedication, bravery and skill. This book brings all this out and more. Highly recommend it as a great read.

5.0 out of 5 stars **I was there.**, January 28, 2013

By [E. Thornwell Arthur](#) (Irvine, Ca) -



Length:: 1:22 Mins

I thought I would make a video review as something different. I was a crewchief on the O-1 Bird Dogs with the 220th in 1968 so this book was fascinating to me.

I highly recommend it!

Ed

4.0 out of 5 stars **Jargon**, January 24, 2013

By [Richard G. Clark](#) -

This is a great book but you'll have some trouble understanding some of it if you weren't past military - even then you need to have some Army/Air Force background for the differences between the branches.

5.0 out of 5 stars **Excellent read**, January 10, 2013

By [scott lagrant](#) -

Absolutely amazing what those brave young pilots did over there to help their fellow Americans. Couldn't put it down. One of the best books about Vietnam I've read.

5.0 out of 5 stars **A hundred feet over hell**, December 25, 2012

By [wilber breseman](#) -

Had to keep reading it. As a grunt in Viet Nam 68-69, it was interesting reading about our battles from a different angle.

5.0 out of 5 stars **A Hundred Feet Over Hell**, December 20, 2012

By [Roger S. Durham](#) -

Found this book to be very interesting and a wonderful glimpse into this small facet of the Vietnam conflict. Bravery was hard to measure in Vietnam since everyone who served faced uncertainty and death in

varying degrees. These men did their job above and beyond as they tried to support the ground forces against a dedicated enemy. The comradery and the shared adversity is clearly demonstrated in this book illustrating the boredom of the "down" time and the rush of the combat missions. This was an eye-opening read and one that kept me focused on reaching the next page. Being a Nam vet myself, I must say that my hat is off to these soldiers and their devotion to duty and to each other.

4.0 out of 5 stars **Good Vietnam war stories.**, November 3, 2012

By [Nick](#) -

I really enjoyed this read. It has some funny stories that you'll always find associated with man and aircraft, and plenty of stories giving an account of what it was like in combat with an aircraft that appears a little too easy to shoot down. It's compiled from several men's accounts, so you'll view it from several different angles, like a good 3D movie really.

5.0 out of 5 stars **A Hundred Feet Over Hell**, October 25, 2012

By [Thomas L. Jones](#) -

The author has done a marvelous job of capturing the flavor of the day to day action in the northern I Corps area of operations in Vietnam. Most people do not realize the amazing flying and the crucial role the Cat Killers played in protecting and aiding the infantry troops on the ground. This book brings to life the constant tension of day to day combat as well as some of the lighter moments. As the OIC of Dong Ha DASC for at least part of the time period described in this book I had firsthand knowledge of some of the events and at least from my perspective, these are "true stories unembellished by time". I bought an extra copy to loan to my friends as I did not want to risk losing my original. A great read!

5.0 out of 5 stars **A Hundred Feet of Hell**, September 26, 2012

By [Neal Sands](#) - [See all my reviews](#)

A great read, especially for a current L-19 driver! Very interesting the similarities between Vietnam and current Forward Air Control operations.

5.0 out of 5 stars **Courage and Sacrifice - Unforgettable Stories**, September 12, 2012 By [Tim F. Merriman](#) -

This book is powerful using the candid words and recollections of pilots flying slowly over the Vietnamese landscape to control air strikes. I had no understanding of the complexity of how these ground troop air support attacks worked or the incredible courage it took to fly through

a hail of gunfire while making split-second decisions to save our troops on the ground. These brave soldiers lived through a very difficult conflict and deserve our respect and understanding. The book brings the Vietnam War into even sharper focus. It is a great read and a somber lesson.

4.0 out of 5 stars **A Hundred Feet Over Hell**, July 30, 2012

By [sketiger](#) -

The book was about real situations and real heros. I had trouble putting it down. I served in Viet Nam and cannot imagine how these guys kept going up into these situations and doing it day after day. Great Book if you like war stories especially true ones.

5.0 out of 5 stars **You even get the smell**, April 8, 2012

By [N. M. Cameron](#) -

Brilliant book, gives a critical insight into what had to be the riskiest flying job. In a crazy war, these people excelled. There is no ego massaging here, and REMF's are seen for what they are, stupidity is exposed and dealt with, I think this book should be next to Chickenhawk. I think that the US military won't like it at all.

5.0 out of 5 stars **A Hundred Feet Over Hell**, March 22, 2012

By [Alan Ogawa](#) -

The Author has put years of research and countless hours of interviews with the men who made a difference in the Vietnam War. This book shows the courage of men who flew the catkillers around the DMZ to support the ground troops who were out numbered by the enemy NVA Regiments who were trying to take over South Vietnam. The Ho Chi Min trail was the highway to bring supplies and support communist troops down South. We lost a lot of good men trying to stop them, I know because I was there as a Infantry man at the DMZ. These pilots risked from being shot down every day and still flew to support us. I owe my life to them, Thanks Alan Ogawa

5.0 out of 5 stars **100 feet over hell**, March 20, 2012

By [Don Schreiner](#) -

Having served in Viet Nam, and being assigned to a Direct Air Support Flight, I appreciate the experiences documented in this book. The title is appropriate.

5.0 out of 5 stars **A Hundred Feet Over Hell**, March 18, 2012

By [Johnny W. Mosley "JohnnyW"](#)

Having known Jim since the 70's and read everything he's written,I may be a bit partial.This book is up there with the best about the Viet

Nam war, and from first hand accounts makes it even better. These young men did not get the credit they deserve. Thank God most of this is done by drones now because this type of man doesn't come along much anymore. Too all Cat Killers, Crazy Kat's SALUTE! And Thank You.

5.0 out of 5 stars **A grunt's perspective**, March 9, 2012

By [Thomas](#) (RAMROD KEY, FL, United States) -

*Note: this review was written for the 3rd Bn. 3rd Marines Vietnam group*

The hell of which Jim Hooper writes was, for some of us, our hell, the DMZ 1968 and 69. Those little Cessna type airplanes buzzing above us are what this book is about. Their call sign was Catkiller and the pilots were US Army. The aerial observer in the back seat was a Marine and used the call sign Southern. The support those guys gave to 3/3 and other grunt units cannot be praised highly enough. They were our Guardian Angels. They gave us an overview of the situation that was impossible to get with AK rounds passing inches overhead. They warned us when the enemy tried flanking or envelopment movements. They adjusted artillery on our enemies in the next hedgerow or tree line. They brought in the Phantoms and Sky Hawks we requested and fired the marking rounds for the fast movers to annihilate the enemy who kept us from retrieving our wounded. And when we heard NVA guns above the DMZ kettle drumming and then the incoming rounds screeching down on us, it was the Catkillers who flew up there and directed the counter battery fire, airstrikes and naval gunfire to shut them down.

The author, who is not a Vietnam veteran, had a very good source of information; his brother Bill Hooper piloted one of those Bird Dogs. The book details the complicated business of hovering slowly above NVA troops and vectoring in jet aircraft traveling six times faster while marking the target for the jets with rockets and making sure the jets knew where we were. If you ever wondered how all that happens this book will let you know. Then there's the high plane low plane game they played with NVA artillery north of the Ben Hai River. The high plane flew at 6000 feet to spot muzzle flashed. The low plane flew at a thousand to draw their fire. How's that for a stressful job? As the recipients of much NVA artillery this book explains what brave men did to get it shut off for us. Thank you Catkillers.

The Catkillers were based out of Phu Bai and Dong Ha. Yes, they had hot chow and a rack to sleep in and yes they lived better than us grunts out in the weeds. But reading this book you see they sure earned it.

Reviewed by Jeff "TJ" Kelly  
Author of DMZ Diary

Mike Company & H&S Comm Platoon, TACP section  
3rd Bn., 3rd Marines, 3rd Marine Division 1968

5.0 out of 5 stars **A Journey Back to the Past**, March 3, 2012

By [VonHoltz](#) -

Having performed maintenance of the L-19 (O-1) from 1959 thru 1963 at Ft. Indiantown Gap, Camp AP Hill, and Ft. Knox Kentucky, this book brought back many memories. We were able to bum rides with the pilots then, and there was a spare stick you could place in the socket of the back seater to maneuver the aircraft, which I did some of. As to the book it keeps you on the edge and is very hard to put down. It recreates the conditions of the Vietnam War and allows you to appreciate what these young men went through. I take my hat off not only to the author, but to the other brave men living and dead who flew these light very vulnerable aircraft. I'm sure this was a life marking experience for all of them. Reading the book you can nearly hear the rockets wooshing and the AAA firing back. If I had a choice to buy this book over again, I would buy the book edition instead of the Kindle edition, just to have it available and to lend. There's also something about having a book you really treasure in the form of a regular book rather than stored in electronic memory.

5.0 out of 5 stars **Good Buy**, February 9, 2012

By [Jason](#) -

I'm only half way through this book but very pleased. It is as described, puts you right in the action. Lots of Vietnam military terminology used which takes some getting used to but you get the hang of it quick and it adds to the realizem. I recommend this book to anyone with an interest in the Vietnam War and I recommend this to any pilot. As a general aviation pilot I just can't imagine flying the small airplanes we fly in such an environment. Enjoy!

5.0 out of 5 stars **220th Avn Co - Darn good pilots!**, July 30, 2011

By [USA Retired](#) (OBX, NC) -

Excellent read! I served with the Americal and the 101st. This is the real stuff! Buy it and enjoy. I did! The author mentioned Bill Norton. I'm pretty sure that I went to the Field Artillery Advanced course with him in 1975. I don't remember him as an aviator. I sure hope he is still adjusting fire.

5.0 out of 5 stars **Painfully up close**, July 25, 2011

By [Eric](#) -

This is one of those books I finally managed to put down to go to sleep, but then decided to do just one more page. Or maybe a



chapter. Or maybe just finish it in the process. And I put it down frequently to let things sink in. It is really up close & personal. Realistic yet unbelievable at the same time. Shocking and yet remote. I found myself grabbing other books and web pages on the Vietnam war to get a grip on the context and setting around the storyline.

The book shows an under-exposed side of both aviation and Vietnam, and the twisted involvement of many. Well-researched, well-written.

5.0 out of 5 stars **I was there and that's what I did**, March 31, 2011 By [Francis A. doherty](#) -

Hooper's story was long overdue. I was personally acquainted with several of the pilots mentioned in this book. We went to flight school together, were in Vietnam at the same time, or flew for the same airline. What I really appreciated was Hooper's celebration of a great little airplane that you didn't so much fly as wrap around you. Ground-fire notwithstanding the L-19 was so much fun to fly. I hope the reader gets a sense of the selfless bravery of the pilots who flew this airplane and this mission. So close to the ground that the enemy had a face that could be seen, and he could see us. Hooper's story took me back to a time in my youth when I was bullet-proof...

5.0 out of 5 stars **Fantastic**, February 18, 2011

By [Vance L. Mccrumb "19dutch65"](#) (michigan) -

Just finished 100 Feet Over Hell. I can't recall a book taking me through all the emotions I experienced reading it. Jim Hooper put me in that tiny cockpit as he wrote about the brave pilots as they flew their missions in support of the grunts on the ground. I have read many novels about Vietnam, but none come close to explaining the supporting role of the bird dogs and their ground crews. I highly recommend 100 Feet Over Hell.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful

5.0 out of 5 stars **MUST READ !!!!**, January 10, 2011

By [Joseph Crowson](#) -

I have read countless books on the Vietnam War. From stories of SOG's elite to the fighter pilots over Hanoi. I read them all. This was the first book I read on FAC's and I must say it was one of the best books I have read on 'Nam. Well written, full of action, humor, and morality, this book has it all! These guys flew unarmored prop driven Cessnas into North Vietnam and all over South Vietnam sometimes below tree top level to call in arty, air strikes and sometimes to fire their M16's out the windows during the heat of intense battles. And they all did it well.



5.0 out of 5 stars **Great Book, unique writing style**, December 30, 2010 By [Shaun M. Bailey "Flybefree"](#) (Enterprise, AL) -

My father flew O-1s in Vietnam and I loved reading about the day to day life and times of the Army crews that flew missions in those little planes. Could have used a few more maps and illustrations, especially in the key combat sequences involving BN sized ops in the DMZ. Well written in a "magazine" style using interviews from the pilots and men on the ground. Great tribute the courage of the men who served and well written enough to recommend to any friend interested in MIL history.

5.0 out of 5 stars **"A Hundred Feet Over Hell" is a great read**, October 7, 2010 By [Robert M. Engstrom](#) -

I recently finished reading the book A Hundred Feet Over Hell written by war correspondent Jim Hooper. It's a good read that I recommend for the well-told flying stories and the history of these pilots. The book is recollections told by a handful of pilots who flew single-engine O-1 Cessnas (formerly designated the L-19 Birdog) over the battlefields of Vietnam in the mid-60s directing airstrikes and artillery barrages.

The author's brother was one of those pilots flying low over firefights marking targets with smoke rockets while being shot at and hit by enemy anti-aircraft and small arms. They orbited above the action to coordinate communications with ground forces, helicopter gunships, ground and sea artillery and attack aircraft. It's the personal story of military pilots, heroic feats in the air and the poignant, hilarious and heartbreaking events of life in a war zone.

Pilots who have flown a fair amount learn that flying is hours of boredom interspersed with a few brief seconds of excitement, near panic, even sheer terror. The Catkillers of 220th Reconnaissance Airplane Company spent hours of heart-in-the-throat flying low and slow in the mountains and valleys of the DMZ and surrounding area to identify targets.

I never flew in the military, but I've flown everything from J-3s to DC-3s, including a little stick time in a restored O-1, which is basically a Cessna 170 with a true joystick and a Cessna 180 engine on it. I was shot at and missed twice while flying low and slow aeromagnetic surveys. My Supercub wasn't much less bullet resistant than an O-1. It was terrifying--and I earned much better wages than the Catkillers.

A Hundred Feet Over Hell is available on the author's website at [...] where you can read reviews of this and other books Jim has written

about his experiences as a war correspondent and photojournalist.

Take a look, and buy the book. You won't regret it.

5.0 out of 5 stars **Been There, Catkiller 26**, September 24, 2010

By [twspot](#) -

A Hundred Feet Over Hell, took me back to a time that was always in my mind, but very seldom spoke about. I knew all the great pilots who risked their lives every day they were in the air and at times on the ground during the 1968-1969 period. When you read this outstanding book, you realize these were men who were "just doing their job", but in reality, were hero's. They didn't look for praise, just wanted to do whatever it took to protect their brothers on the ground. If that meant putting their lives in harms way, so be it. I'm proud to have served with these men. Thanks to Jim Hooper for telling such a gripping and true account.

5.0 out of 5 stars **Amazing even to the those without any military connection**, September 12, 2010 By [Jeffrey M. Taffet MD](#) (phoenix)

I have never served in the military. I normally don't gravitate towards "war story" books, but in this case I'm glad I did. During the post Vietnam era I was in surgical training at a V.A. hospital in Brooklyn. I heard all sorts of stories from injured vets; many of which I attributed to embellishment (or morphine). I was jaded. I was so wrong. Hooper has done his homework. He is a master story teller who puts you into the mind of these brave young pilots, so you see the action through their eyes. I look back now at these men and am humbled by their feats. They didn't do it for medals or acknowledgement; they did it to help their comrades and out of a binding sense of duty and honor. Hooper never comes out and says that; he doesn't have to. He tells it straight and in the end I "got it". I continue to care for wounded Airmen in my practice and thanks in part to this book, realize what a privilege and honor it is to do so.

5.0 out of 5 stars **Transport yourself to hundred feet over Hell**, July 18, 2010 By [Sandy](#) -

This book's message is in good hands. The author is a seasoned war correspondent whose brother, Bill, served in Vietnam as a "Catkiller" pilot in the 220th Reconnaissance Airplane Company. Bill and his merry band of "Myth Makers" had the role of flying flimsy little single-engine Cessnas, that could barely exceed speeds of a passenger car, to seek out the positions of the enemy, provide assistance to troops in peril, and engage in combat if necessary.

I've ridden in one of these airplanes; my dad owned and flew one on the farm in the '70's. These are little more than motorized tin cans with some wings and plastic windows. The very idea that these pilots would fly into some of the most hostile terrain in the war, scribbling radio frequencies and coordinates with wax pencils on the windows, communicating with troops under fire and ground control, in zero-visibility weather, literally hanging out of their windows shooting weapons and throwing grenades, all at only hundreds of feet above the ground in mountainous territory and with plumes of napalm exploding around them...it is terrifying. These boys had nerves of steel.

When Jim Hooper began to help his brother compile his thoughts about his experiences in Nam, he located some of his brother's platoon mates and found them eager to share their memories as well. As horrific as the war was, it seems that they were not only adrenaline junkies, feeding off the constant thrill of near-death experiences, but also felt the camaraderie and the bond of a unified cause to be unparalleled in life. The result was something more than just a book. It is a real-time narrative, with all of the players taking turns, jumping in with their contribution to the story. I would liken this reading experience to transporting yourself back in time, into the cockpit, re-living some of their most memorable missions.

We get to know the pilot's personalities, their quirks, their strengths and weaknesses. Because of the intense pressure experienced in the air, these boys had to blow off steam through drinking, fart humor, poker, and practical jokes that were nearly as dangerous as combat. Bless Hooper, because he includes pictures - I love pictures - so the reality of their brave, handsome faces are etched in your mind. Hooper's last gift to us is the epilogue, letting us know what happened to the boys after the war. (I get the sense that many of the pilots continued to seek that same adrenaline rush once they had returned stateside.)

For those who decide to read this, I will mention that you may have some initial issues in reading some of the dialogue. It is snappy and filled with pilot and war lingo. There is a helpful glossary in the back to help you wade through, but this was a drag on my momentum, so I just went for it. No, I didn't know what a Kit Carson scout was, or a Delta-1, but I got the idea.

Often, you will hear that "The Things They Carried" is the quintessential Vietnam novel. In many ways I would agree - it is an everyman's story of the war on the ground. I would argue that "A

Hundred Feet Over Hell" should carry just as much gravitas, only from the perspective of the sky and with a grittier voice.

5.0 out of 5 stars **Should be required reading**, July 16, 2010

By [Thomas D. Cooke](#) -

Jim Hooper has captured a slice of history that will unfortunately drift into obscurity in not too many years. The role of direct ground support for soldiers and marines in enemy contact on the ground, by slow flying, low flying, lightly armed Army aircraft.

Hooper captured the 'pat your head and rub your tummy at the same time' physical skills necessary to just keep the aircraft aloft, while at the same time he shed some insight into the mental conditioning necessary to do the mission and not just turn around and fly for cover.

Add figuring out artillery fire missions or bomb strikes for the jets to support the guys on the ground at night, in the rain, and you might begin to see how difficult those jobs were. It was, pat your head, rub you tummy, juggle with both feet, talk on the radio, figure out the geometry of a fire mission and do all the above at the same time while someone was shooting very large bullets at you frequently.

And Hooper managed to convey that to the reader eloquently in a narrative that spoke with several voices of the men that had been there and done that.

This book is a must read for anyone interested in the history of the Vietnam War. It probably should be required reading for flight school and it definitely should be read by the families of those aviators who to this day have no idea what their loved ones did in the war.

Thomas D. Cooke

Captain

48th Assault Helicopter Co.

10th Combat Aviation Battalion

REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM 1968-1969 (less)

5.0 out of 5 stars **What a great bunch of guys!**, July 10, 2010

By [Amazon Customer](#) (Overland Park, KS United States) -

As a U-21 "Long Trip" pilot I got to fly to all parts of South Vietnam in 1968-69 and can attest that I-Corps and the area around the DMZ was certainly one of the hottest war zones in the country during what was also the bloodiest period of the entire conflict. I went to flight school (the Green Hats) with many of the O-1 pilots featured in this book and

recall them all as a great bunch of pretty ordinary guys who were called upon to do some extraordinary things. I fondly recall Doc Clement in particular as not only one of the best "seat of the pants" pilots I ever flew with, but also as one of the most colorful -- and decent -- individuals I would ever meet in this life. Certainly a good guy to have with you in a tight spot.

This book does a superb job of portraying how so many young Americans fought exceptionally well in a war that was both unpopular at home and poorly supported by the South Vietnamese themselves, whom we were supposedly fighting for. The Catkillers had a tough job and did it well. It's nice to see their story told in a very readable fashion.

4.0 out of 5 stars **A must read, especially for Viet Nam vets.**, July 2, 2010 By [D. Bonadie](#) (Florida) -

Just loved the book. Jim did a wonderful job of portraying life in the war zone for these soldiers, makes you feel like you are there with them.

5.0 out of 5 stars **Little Planes, Big Bravery**, April 19, 2010

By [Lawrence Mayes "Larry Mayes"](#) (Rapid City, SD USA) -

The "Catkillers" of the 220 RAC flew what could very arguably be the most dangerous sustained mission profiles of any aircrews during the Vietnam War. Their vulnerable old O-1 Bird Dogs belonged to a long ago era, yet were pressed into service to provide the eyes for the fast movers and artillery carrying the heavy explosives and napalm to the enemy. Having flown over the Ho Chi Minh Trail with both Walts and Pterodactyls from the 19th TASS and 185th RAC, I was projected back in time by this narrative, right down to the sweat under my helmet and the fear in the pit of my stomach. The Catkillers had a small AO compared to most, only about 60 miles by 20 miles, but it included the very dangerous I Corps and DMZ and they frequently flew into North Vietnam as well. Piloting single engine near antique airplanes over some of the most heavily defended ground ever in the history of warfare is the definition of guts. Author Jim Hooper has captured the essence of what his brother Bill, Catkiller 12, and his fellow pilots and Airborne Observers had to overcome in terms of the enemy, fickle weather, very rudimentary avionics and sometimes unenlightened leadership to carry the war to a capable and determined foe. This book is a collection of vignettes from a number of the Catkillers, sometimes relating near death events in air/ground combat and sometimes just doing not so smart things in the air to break the boredom that comes with war. It is at times gritty, often intensely personal and always

exceptionally readable. There is humor, angst, destruction and death at a very visceral level, written with an obvious passion. This is a very good book and perhaps an even better story, following the participants into their post Vietnam lives and with their insights given from the clear perspective of looking back in time. This is a "must read" for those who have an interest in the Vietnam War.

5.0 out of 5 stars **One Hundred Feet Over Hell**, April 5, 2010

By [Peter H. Erenfeld](#) -

Jim Hooper has written a very "real" book. As an O1 pilot with the "Marine Fingerprints" flying out of Khe Sahn and Quang Tri, I found myself reliving several moments of "sheer terror" followed by total elation. The book is heart-warming but still too fresh in my mind. During the 1968 Tet-Offensive and the seige of Khe Sahn, our "Band of Brother", controlled 80% of all airstrikes in and around Khe Sahn, Hills 881N, 881S, 862, 950 and the surrounding area. The "hero's" of this entire theater of war, was the Marines on the ground. They endured sheer hell for 77 days. By the time the First Air Cav reached Khe Sahn, the enemy had been totally destroyed. Hats off to Mr. Hooper for finally writing a book about a forgotten segment of the war.

5.0 out of 5 stars **We fought for each other**, April 5, 2010

By [Peter Van Haren](#) (Arizona) -

Jim Hooper's excellent book illustrates in a most entertaining way who and what we really fought for over there. Young men like Rod Stewart risked their lives to save guys like me on the ground whom they'd never met and only knew that we were fellow Americans in danger.

When I was first contacted about adding my story to this work I was pretty skeptical. I'd read too many glorified daydreams in print written by those who obviously didn't understand what it was really like to think that this effort would be much different. Man, was I wrong! Like a symphonic conductor, Jim has woven together real life accounts and insightful commentary in a truly masterful work. I have family members who started out only to read the parts where my story appears and wound up devouring the entire book in an evening while declaring it the best collection they'd ever read about the Vietnam War.

I highly recommend this book to anyone who might be interested in a "realistic" portrayal of combat in the Vietnam theater rather than the typical drivel that has been created over the years by most of the

mass media.

Peter Van Haren 2nd Platoon B-1/77 Armor RVN 1968-69

5.0 out of 5 stars **You don't have to imagine - this book puts you there!**, March 23, 2010 By [Ronald C. Richtsmeier](#) (New Braunfels, TX)

I spent two years in Northern Vietnam near the area where the Catkillers operated. I flew helicopter gunships (UH-1B's and Cobras). We operated in a similar setting, but at least we were able to shoot back! Jim Hooper does what few authors are capable of doing. He doesn't just write what he has heard about from these intrepid pilots - he actually puts you in the aircraft. As I read his book I was right back in the action. I experienced the sights, smells, and feelings that I hadn't felt for over 40 years. It is a story that should have been told a long, long time ago. For those that have "been there, done that" you will be able to do it again from your recliner. I guarantee your heart rate will go up. If there was such a thing as a Medal of Honor with "V" device, it would be awarded to some of the O-1 pilots of the Vietnam War. This book deserves 10 stars.

5.0 out of 5 stars **Good story**, March 10, 2010

By [Norman H. Svarrer](#) -

My only fault with the book is a comment on the jacket that said, in so many words, that only the Catkillers could put in airstrikes, artillery and naval gunfire. In fact, Bird Dog pilots in other Corps were trained as FACS by the USAF and Naval Gunfire Forward Observers by the Navy. But that was on the jacket and not found in the book.

"!00 Feet Over Hell" captured my attention right off. You do not have to be a pilot to appreciate what events are told in the book. Hooper has a knack of telling his story for everyone.

In my case, I was a bird dog pilot in the 221 RAC in IV Corps 65-66 and a Mohawk pilot in I Corps 68-69. The book expertly describes the Bird Dog mission as I knew it. The enemy called the Bird Dog the "Old Lady Airplane. It flies around and looks and then talks and talks about what it has seen." As "!00 Feet Over Hell" relates, it talked to artillery, air and naval gunfire with devastating results for the enemy.

The book's geography is accurate. He places Dong Ha, Phu Bai, Con Thien and others on the map with reference to where they fit into the overall battle. The DMZ was only demilitarized for us; the NVA used it at will. Hooper aptly points that out.



I recommend "100 Feet Over Hell" to anyone interested in the way it was in Vietnam.

Norman Svarrer AKA Shotgun 10 and Redeye 02.

5.0 out of 5 stars **Five Star Classic!**, March 1, 2010

By [Donald M. Ricks "Webmaster"](#) (Decatur, Alabama, United States) -

Warriors pass to other men, who also become warriors, the example and masculinity needed to succeed as a warrior. That is why we have check pilots, instructors, standardization pilots, and heroes like the real characters in Jim Hooper's book A Hundred Feet Over Hell. These men were able to do their job well because of other men doing their jobs well; like the company staff, the supply chain, maintenance support, and the guys who kept the airplanes flying. No man accomplishes much in life without other men, but we often find it difficult to acknowledge this fact. Jim Hooper writes with skill to demonstrate the interconnectivity between men of strength, courage, and acquired ability and the success of men who follow. Without our consensus examples, men struggle to discover their true identity and purpose. This book is full of real men, who knew who they were, from the flight line soldier to the one who launched the rocket or made the call for help to support units, these are the men who made war. Our warriors, indeed!

As I read Jim Hooper's book, full of his skillful presentation of words and deeds provided by the men highlighted in his book, my mind naturally wandered back to the first days of my own Vietnam era flight experiences. I felt the passion, the often un-acknowledged fear, the awesome exhilaration of the moment. This book will take you back to memories you thought you had forgotten. These accounts are real, they are accurate, they represent what made the unit successful, and they anoint this book a treasure to own and read.

This is a book about men being men; it is all masculine and provocative. Bill Hooper said it plainly: "War was our life. It was what we did." Camaraderie lives where men share experiences and respect for one another. The 220th RAC enjoyed a sterling reputation, because there were standout warriors in every level of unit operations, and this book makes that clear. It is also why the commander merely continued to throw darts when these men let off steam. Leaders knew these men required an outlet. In the words of Bill Hooper, "Perhaps the saddest thing of all was that I would learn to be unemotional about killing, eventually joining others who were very good at it." Those



emotions were often soothed by strange and aggressive brotherly behavior. Jim Wisby, Catkiller Six, made a profound statement, as descriptive as any to affirm the pilots of the unit: "...because they were virtually on their own from takeoff to landing, it also required a personality bordering on controlled recklessness."□ These men loved, laughed, partied, set the example, and influenced everyone in the unit. The enlisted men were strong and valuable, too, inspired by the success and reputation of their officers.

I could write more but choose to merely state that this book is a gift, a labor of intense love for the men of the 220th RAC. Get your copy, and order a copy for your best friend, children, or for anyone you feel will benefit from a Wild At Heart example. An excerpt from the aforementioned book quotes King Henry V, who wrote to his men in 1598:

This story shall the good man teach his son;  
And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,  
From this day to the ending of the world,  
But we in it shall be remember'd;  
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;  
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me  
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,  
This day shall gentle his condition:  
And gentlemen in England now a-bed  
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,  
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks  
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.

Thank you, Jim, for a commendable job in putting together the essence of this special unit.

5.0 out of 5 stars **100 Feet Over Hell, outstanding book**, February 23, 2010 By [William P. Case](#)

An excellent work by Mr. Hooper, one of the most spellbinding books I have read recently. You can actually imagine yourself in the cockpits of those light aircraft who were forward fire control troops for flights of aircraft and on one case a naval bombardment.

By exposing the inner workings of the tactical situations in Nam, Hooper helps you understand, from an extremely personal level, what it felt like to see ground troops, both enemy and friendly forces, and how the Catkillers in many cases saved lives and held off the enemy until ground troops could either escape from the attacks or until the enemy could be routed from the area.

Hooper's extremely vivid description of his brother taking fire and actually getting hit will leave you amazed and holding your breath for the outcome of the incident.

By weaving together individual accounts of the same incidents, Hooper allows you get a 360 degree view of specific actions and leaves you better able to understand the "Big Picture" of enemy engagement and what it took to neutralize enemy actions.

If you were at all involved in the Vietnam war you owe it to yourself to get a copy of this book and read it, you will not be dissatisfied.

5.0 out of 5 stars **Daredevil's over the DMZ**, January 12, 2010

By [Michael W. Potter](#) -

I loved "A Hundred Feet Over HELL" by Jim Hooper from the first page. I spent hundreds of hours as an aerial observer in the same area flying out of Dong Ha and Camp Carroll for the 108th Artillery, the 1st Bn 5th(MECH), the 1st Arvn Regiment and the 101st Airborne, and sad to say I didn't know much about the Catkillers, even though I bunked for a few months with the aviators in Dong Ha, a very rowdy and fun loving group. This book is riveting and I couldn't put it down. I knew the terrain intimately and the stories brought back many memories of that area and the DMZ, the people and wonderful soldiers I met and served with. The professionalism and bravery of the aviators and their "backseats" put the rest of us to shame. The author worked hard to put together not only a comprehensive timeline of events, but fleshed it in wonderfully with personal stories and vignettes and even was able to find some of the grateful "ground pounders" who lives and limbs they saved. I do know about that as I've seen their work first hand. It's a great book, and one of the few that talks about northern I Corps other than about the Tet offensive at Khe Sahn.

5.0 out of 5 stars **Hooper's Heroes - A Hundred Feet Over Hell**, December 4, 2009 By [R. Daniel Mulligan](#) (Bracebridge, ON CAN)

Mr Jim Hooper's rousing compilation "A Hundred Feet Over Hell", documenting the absolutely incredible exploits of the 220th Recon Airplane Company are a DEFINITE must-read for anyone who has even just dreamt of piloting a small aircraft. Sit back and enjoy a long overdue history lesson detailing previously unknown heroics of a small band of plank drivers who were undoubtedly responsible for countless lives saved by placing themselves in harm's way during every flight. This dumb, Irish helo pilot enjoyed every page!

5.0 out of 5 stars **Outstanding!**, December 3, 2009

By [A. Chisholm](#) (Northern Virginia)

100 Feet Over Hell is extremely well written in first hand accounts of the bravery and ingenuity of these young men. Dad was a Catkiller just prior to the time period of these accounts. This book gives me a whole new perspective and appreciation for his recollections of those days flying FAC. Thank you for your service Dad and thank you for a great book Jim!

5.0 out of 5 stars **GREAT read!**, November 29, 2009

By [Donald Lincoln](#) (West Chester, PA) -

I read this book because I am acquainted with one of the featured flyers. It is a riveting collection of tales - part history, part diary, part journal - of those who served in Vietnam in ways that are at times beyond imagining. I was captivated by the "real time" sense of the Forward Air Control stories, and even more, astounded by the way in which Jim Hooper connected troops on the ground DECADES LATER with the flyboys - and marveled as they learned who it was that long ago saved their butts by their selfless service as they located their infantry brothers and called in resources to save the day. This was unlike any other account of the Vietnam era I have seen or read. I highly recommend it! Rev. Don Lincoln, West Chester, PA

5.0 out of 5 stars **Wow...**, November 29, 2009

By [Wooglin](#) (The Halls of \_kai\_)

This was a great read. The book is in an interview style, but it doesn't detract from the reading experience at all. I learned a lot about what the Catkillers and their service was.

I've lent this book out to all my family, because we all know someone who was in the Catkillers.

5.0 out of 5 stars **Catkillers**, November 26, 2009

By [Charles M. GALLIENNE](#) (Richmond, Va) -

What a great read! This book is a captivating story of the Vietnam conflict. I read this book over a weekend, it's a very quick read, and there were times I felt like I was the "back-seater" in Bill Hooper, Charles Finch, or "Doc" Clements Catkiller 18. I loved your story guys... God Bless You All

Hey Doc! Castle Heights Military Academy "69"

5.0 out of 5 stars **Alone, Unarmed, Unafraid, Yeah right!**, November 24, 2009

By [Michael L. Seely "Mike Seely"](#) (Gainesville,GA) -

I also flew O-1s as a pilot in the 74th RAC in 65-66 III Corps. I can attest to the accuracy of the story line. Without sounding self aggrandizing, it is a very vivid and accurate depiction of combat in the Bird Dog. I was afforded the privilege of previewing the transcript

before it went to print, and I can assure you that Hooper has done his level best to tell a true story without embellishment because, it needs none.

I agree with previous reviews, that if you served in Viet Nam and had contact with these diminutive air craft and their intrepid pilots, you will be taken back in time and will relive the chaos, and the brotherhood of souls trying to survive a difficult time.

Read the reviews, they all can't be wrong. It is a page turner, enjoy.

5.0 out of 5 stars **Minute by Minute excitement**, November 24, 2009 By [John Mateyko](#) -

Jim Hooper has captured the essence of combat flying. The bullets seem to rip through the cockpit; the radio chatter with the grunts, support aircraft and other FACs are true to life. These men hung their lives on the props of single engine aircraft to support the infantrymen. 100 Feet Over Hell ranks in the top five combat books I have read. I flew Hueys in Vietnam, these guys had larger gonads than most. John

5.0 out of 5 stars **I know one of these guys.**, October 28, 2009 By [William D. Goodner](#) -

Great read. Gives excellent insight into the mind set of soldiers from that era. These guys were a true "band of brothers" as well as great americans. Hope someone makes this story into a movie. It reveals is a facinating aspect of "close air support" in Vietnam that few people know about.

5.0 out of 5 stars **Worth every page and penny**, October 20, 2009 By [William R. Davis](#) (FL Panhandle) -

I was honestly sad that the book came to an end. This will forever be one of my favorites I've ever read.

5.0 out of 5 stars **Review for "100 Feet Over Hell" by Al Sims**, October 13, 2009 By [Kymberlee E. Braun "Book Monger"](#) (Georgia) -

As a combat veteran of the 101st Airborne Division in the very same I Corps region as the setting for the book, I thought I was familiar with combat operations. After reading "100 Feet Over Hell", I was able to see the war from a much different perspective. All we knew about Bird Dogs was that they were a radio call sign for artillery. Jim Hooper gives vivid descriptions through the eyes of his brother and fellow Bird

Dogs. The absolute hell that the Bird Dogs went through to provide artillery support for us grunts on the ground was something I didn't appreciate until reading this book. "100 Feet Over Hell" is very well written, well presented and well researched. Jim Hooper is a professional writer and his talent shows throughout this book.

5.0 out of 5 stars **War Told by the Men Who Fought It!**, October 5, 2009 By [Walter Shiel "Novelist & Historian"](#) (Michigan's Upper Peninsula) -

Hooper's book is more about the men who fought a thankless war over one of the most hazardous areas in an unarmored, virtually unarmed, and slow airplane (the Cessna O-1 Bird Dog) than about flying the Bird Dog. Men who flew and fought right down in the weeds, typically well within the range of even small arms fire. The men were mostly young, newly minted Army pilots with an abundance of determination, intestinal fortitude, and camaraderie and a limited tolerance for bureaucracy and regulations.

Most of the book is told in their own words, with inputs from several participants alternated as a particular event or story unfolds, all blended with editorial commentary to set the scene and provide a "higher altitude" view of what was going on. This approach provides a thoroughly engaging means of understanding not only what was happening but what those combatants were thinking and how they were handling both the stresses and challenges of combat.

However, Hooper does not just tell one combat story after another. He wisely provides a lot of insights into what they did before and after missions, how they dealt with the constant threat of death, and how they partied to alleviate the tensions of war. Again, most of this is told in the first-person by the men who lived it.

If you're an experienced combat pilot, you'll feel a kinship with the young men in the book. If you're not, you'll come away with a renewed appreciation for their trials, successes, and even failures.

This is a book I highly recommend!

5.0 out of 5 stars **Edge-of-your-seat reading for young and old**, September 30, 2009 By [Dusty Punch](#) (McKinley, WI USA)  
It's difficult to imagine more heroic men than those featured in "A Hundred Feet Over Hell." Pilots and veterans of the highest order, these brave--some would say "crazy"--men flew in close aerial proximity to some of the deadliest combat zones of the past 100

years, all in an effort to support the fighting Marines and soldiers on the ground. Even more amazing, these aviators did so in airplanes that most outsiders would guess weighed less than the pilots themselves. Author Jim Hooper has a passion for the topic--his brother was one of the pilots featured in the book--and it shows in his prose. The riveting firsthand accounts from the flyers themselves only add a hair-raising dimension to an already made-for-Hollywood story. Get yourself a copy of this book ASAP!

5.0 out of 5 stars **A great read.**, August 24, 2009

By [Michael Owens](#) (Victorville, CA) -

I was with the 2nd. Batt. 3rd. Marines during the time frame covered by this book. Our AO was the area described by Jim, northern I Corps. His descriptions of places and events are so vivid that I felt I was back on Foxtrot ridge. If you were there you need to read this book.

5.0 out of 5 stars **fasten your seatbelt and enjoy.**, August 2, 2009

By [BentStarProject.org](#) -

A very good read with an interesting perspective based upon the use of first person voice, being very effective...nice flowing style...terror, excitement, manly men....good stuff. History, flying, real time experiences with focused dedicated individuals makes for an engrossing story of men, doing a job seldom heard about by the general public. The author puts you in the front seat of the Bird Dog, out on the front lines taking enemy fire and staying to ensure that air and /or artillery support gave relief to the troops on the edge of being overrun and killed. Hats off to tireless, fearless warriors doing their job!! Buy the book, tighten your seat belt, enjoy the flight!!

5.0 out of 5 stars **Daring young men in their flying machines**, August 2, 2009

By [John Castro](#) (Woodbridge, VA)

If you were in VietNam as a "grunt" or an aviator this is a book you need to read. Its both a history and a tribute to a unique group of young men who did incredible things with their small, slow planes while supporting our troops on the ground. Jim Hooper has done a great job of assembling the experiences of his brother's unit and presenting them in a way that the reader can appreciate the dedication and professionalism of each member of the Catkillers. As a VietNam vet who had the privilege of working with both Army and Air Force aviators, I thoroughly enjoyed the book and recommend it highly.

5.0 out of 5 stars **A Hundred Feet Over Hell**, August 2, 2009

By [Joe Noah "Joe Noah"](#) (Virginia) -

This book is most revealing of the hazards faced by the pilots and spotters who flew the Bird Dogs in Vietnam. It reveals their bravery, their vital concern over their fellow soldiers many of whom they saved from a certain death or capture! The first hand accounts by those who flew and were there is outstanding! Highly recommended.

Joe Noah, Preddy Memorial Foundation

5.0 out of 5 stars **Pure Visceral Story Telling**, June 19, 2009

By [C. Fletcher "Chuck Fletcher"](#) (Georgetown, TX) -

Very few books capture my rapt attention enough to read them through without stopping. A Hundred Feet Over Hell is one of those. Jim Hooper has skillfully crafted the 220th Catkiller story by seasoning first person accounts from those that served as Catkillers with his own third person narrative to add context only when necessary. It's a blend that works and does justice to their incredible story of skill, courage, sacrifice, humor and sadness set in the backdrop of the Vietnamese DMZ during the late sixties.

As a retired military professional and Army aviator of a more recent era, I am simply amazed and deeply impressed at the hair raising feats these Army FACs and their Marine observers accomplished over and across the DMZ on a daily basis with their small and frail O-1 Bird Dogs, a few marking rockets, M-16s, grenades, radios and a map. It's the stuff of legend and a proud legacy for all current and future warriors to be inspired by.

I highly recommend this book for your reading and library collection. You won't be disappointed.

Above the Best!

5.0 out of 5 stars **A HUNDRED FEET OVER HELL**, June 10, 2009

By [Joanne Wisby "JO WISBY"](#) (HOPKINSVILLE, KY USA) -

A HUNDRED FEET OVER HELL WAS WRITTEN BY JIM HOOPER ABOUT THE 220TH RAC IN VIETNAM DURING THE WAR. MY HUSBAND SERVED WITH THE UNIT FOR ONE YEAR. WHILE I HAVE HEARD HIS "STORIES" OVER THE YEAR, IT WAS NICE TO SEE IT ALL CONNECTED BY THE OTHER BRAVE MEN WHO WERE THERE. IT BROUGHT BACK LOTS OF EMOTIONS AND MEMORIES! THANKS, JIM

5.0 out of 5 stars **Fascinating**, June 3, 2009

By [Mr. Timothy Davenport](#) -



Fac's were a unique breed of pilots and all had varying types of experiences in Vietnam. Having been a Swampfox delta Fac it's interesting to read a fellow Fac's experience in another part of Vietnam.

5.0 out of 5 stars **a fantastic read**, May 26, 2009

By [Wayne D. Martin "Mar10w"](#) -

A Hundred Feet Over Hell is a great insight into what these young men went through in 1968-9. The action is fast and one small mistake would have ended in tragedy (which it often did). A great read with the details of particular missions and a few "off mission" exploits. I really enjoyed the book.

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5.0 out of 5 stars **History of the Catkillers -- men who flew 100 feet over Vietnam**, May 25, 2009

By [J. Rudy "IT Professional"](#) (USA) - [See all my reviews](#)  
(VINE VOICE)

Jim Hooper's "A Hundred Feet Over Hell" is the story of his brother's Vietnam War experiences flying the O-1 Bird Dog Observation Aircraft. Bill Hooper was a Tactical Air Controller - Airborne, or a TACA. He flew this low-flying, slow-speed aircraft with the 220th Reconnaissance Aircraft Company, a unit known by their call-sign "Catkillers". In the second war of the Jet Age, the Bird Dog was a very unglamorous aircraft, but to the men on the ground, having a Bird Dog overhead was like having your own personal guardian angel. Hooper's book does an outstanding job of documenting the contributions of the Catkillers between 1968 and 1969.

"A Hundred Feet Over Hell" is a very personal story told by the men who lived the war. Hooper does an amazing job telling the story of how these aviators called in airstrikes in support of ground troops. After reading the book, the reader gains a new appreciation for the difficulty of simultaneous flying a plane; describing a target to a jet aircraft traveling four times as fast and 10,000 feet higher than you; and avoiding ground fire. American aviators were the best in this lethal business.

In the chapter "Busy Month of June", Hooper describes a Catkiller attack on a North Vietnamese Truck Convoy. "I started climbing, mentally computing where I wanted to roll in. At about eight hundred



feet, I nosed over. Fixed on the windscreen of the lead truck, I armed both outboard tubes. The truck grew larger, and I could see the driver leaning forward to look up. Steadyyy. Passing through five hundred feet, I squeezed the trigger, holding the dive for the split second it took the rockets to ignite and clear the tubes. In less time than it takes to describe, they hit. What happened next was not part of the plan."

Hooper put together this book by interviewing the men who flew with the Catkillers; and he corroborated these stories by researching various official documents such as radio logs from the various command posts associated with the Catkillers.

A minor annoyance in the book is the non-capitalization of marines, air force, and navy. In modern American military parlance, there is only one Army, one Marine Corps, one Navy, and one Air Force. Therefore, when referring to these specific American military organizations, the term is always capitalized.

Overall, "A Hundred Feet Over Hell" is a fantastic book capturing the experiences of this small set of aviators. 469 TACAs (and Air Force FACAs or Forward Air Controllers) were shot down during the Vietnam War. This book is a fitting tribute to their contributions. I highly recommend this book to any aviation enthusiast.

5.0 out of 5 stars **Proud to have served**, May 24, 2009

By [John A. Lee "Honored Veteran"](#) (Roswell, GA) -

On this Memorial Day, I am proud to be counted among the few that had the honor of serving our country. I read this book and found the writing to be both engaging and moving. In retrospect, of how these men were seen by "some" people in our nation, it is refreshing to see and "feel" the journey these boys to men accomplished. I believe this book is both moving and remarkable to see all that these men did for every single soldier they protected. I salute all those who served for honor, country and most importantly each other.

5.0 out of 5 stars **Well-deserved recognition**, May 21, 2009

By [H. J. Mowrey](#) (CT, USA) -

This terrific book tells the story of a company of Army fixed-wing aviators performing forward air controller duties flying very slow, prop-driven, single engine Cessna aircraft over some of the hottest battlefields of the Vietnam war.

From grunts on the ground wading through the swamps of the Delta or

struggling through the jungle highlands, to medical personnel providing care to wounded warriors, to the pilots and crews of helicopters or "fast-mover" jet aircraft, to small Special Forces units patrolling deep in enemy-controlled areas in Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos, each veteran saw the war from their individual perspective. In this book, Jim Hooper tells about the Vietnam war from the perspective of his brother Bill and his fellow aviators providing their forward air controller services in support of Marines and Army grunt units on the ground in the northern part of South Vietnam known as I Corp.

As a veteran of the U.S. Army (1967-70), I served both stateside and elsewhere in the Asia during the period covered by this book. Probably because of my service as well as my long-standing fascination with military history, I have read many books about war and I can say that this book ranks right up there with the very best.

5.0 out of 5 stars **A Hundred Feet Over Hell**, May 18, 2009

By [Barbara L. Clement](#) (Plant City, Florida) -

This book is "edge of the seat" and "riveting". It gives an eye opening account of what our service men endure and accomplish. For us safely in our homes and everyday life, it is hard to believe it is humanly possible for men to achieve this type of bravery. My thanks to all the men who have gone before this book and who will follow. "Myth Makers" is the best title given to them. The author has given a professional and detail read.

5.0 out of 5 stars **Hold On To Your Seat**, May 12, 2009

By [J. Gregory](#) (Milan, MI USA) -

This was a fantastic read. It pulled me in and didn't let me go until I finished it. The author weaves an incredible tale of young men in small, slow aircraft facing death every day while striving to save the lives of their fellow soldiers. Well researched through interviews with the actual pilots who flew these missions, it is a fascinating story. One page could have me laughing and the next page could fill me with sadness. The writing style is superb.

5.0 out of 5 stars **So real it was like being there again!**, May 3, 2009 By [TOM RUCKER](#) (WEST PALM BEACH, FL)

If you were in the Viet War, this is a must read book. The boys flying these little, flimsy planes did not get enough credit for saving lives on the ground while risking theirs. A 21 gun salute to all you brave flyers.

5.0 out of 5 stars **The genuine article**, 19 Dec 2009

By [Bruce G. De Wert](#) (Scotland) -

As a private pilot, I found this book to be entirely fascinating and made my own exploits as a fair weather flyer pale into insignificance.

What incredible stress these pilots underwent. To fly at such ridiculously low heights, being shot at and braving death and injury for hours on end, day after day, would test any man.

It is amazing that so many survived. At low level, like this, you are vulnerable not only to anti-aircraft fire but to personal weapons.

The fact is, however, that both Bill Hooper and his colleagues did keep getting back into their cockpits and do it, whether they wanted to or not. I can only wonder at such people and be thankful that I have lived through a time of comparative peace when I was not required to go to war.

The long-term consequences of such stress are to be feared for our own lads who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan. We need to look after them.

I highly recommend this book for the insights that it gives both to the role of spotter aircraft and to the humanity of the pilots that flew them.

5.0 out of 5 stars **Couldn't put it down**, 18 Dec 2009

By [G. L. Avery](#) (UK) -

Only about the third book I've read on Vietnam, but it was really outstanding. Not only a fine account of men in combat, but leavened with humour and humanity.

I thought the format - allowing the men to speak for themselves - worked very well. Plus the author's good knowledge of flying - no descriptive mistakes. A highly recommended read, even for a non-American!

5.0 out of 5 stars **A Great Read**, 7 Mar 2010

By [S. Crowhurst](#) (UK)

If you are thinking about buying this book, then definitely do so. I highly recommend it. It gives an informative, heartfelt account of life in Vietnam, thru the eyes of a rarely known about or heard of group of pilots. It shows the reality of the day to day lives these guys led, and gives a really unique insight into how they coped (or tried to) during their tours. Full of really interesting stories with accounts from

alot of the participants in some of the main firefighths it covers (the marines on the ground, the bird dog pilots etc), you get a unique insight into how they all interacted and worked together during a battle and how intense it all was. There is also has some really hilarious moments in there as well. A nice touch is the epilogue as well, detailing what all the guys featured in the book did in later life.

5.0 out of 5 stars **All Heroes**, 26 Nov 2009

By [P. Pienaar](#) (Pretoria, South Africa) - Having taken part in another war, namely the RSA/Angola conflict in SWA/Namibia, I can relate to the characters in this book. Their dedication, bravery and heroism is brilliantly portrayed by the author. The book 'sucks you in' and it's difficult to put down once the first page is turned. It's a shame that Doc Clement, Bill Hooper, Charlie Finch and their comrades haven't received the recognition for service to their country that they so richly deserve. They lived with death on their shoulder every day that they were in Vietnam and they are true heroes, one and all.

Jim Hooper has certainly captured the subtle nuances of life at the sharp end of war. Even though we may not all agree on the necessity for the Vietnam conflict, the author 'tells it like it is' and it's refreshing to read an honest and accurate account of this 'war within a war'. Full marks for an excellent, exciting and tremendously readable book!!

5.0 out of 5 stars **What an amazing life on the edge**, 19 Jan 2012

By [D. G. Thomas](#) (Laugharne, Wales) -

I love war stories and this is one of the best! A very gripping read that I recommend to anyone....

5.0 out of 5 stars **Bird Dog !**, 1 Mar 2010

By [N. Page](#) (UK) -

A military adaptation of a 1950s design that first saw service during the Korean War, the Cessna Bird Dog was already rather long in the tooth by the time of the Vietnam war. However in the Forward Air Control role the Bird Dog managed to get into far more scrapes than many other far more glamorous combat machines. Although it was a flimsy parasol-winged light aircraft barely capable of 100 mph, the Bird Dog over Vietnam spent most of its time in the early years of the conflict in the air stooging around over the jungle, spotting and sighting within range of every enemy weapon on the battlefield. Author Jim Hooper's brother flew one and this is his story and that of his unit, the 220th Reconnaissance Airplane Company, the 'Catkillers'. It is the tale of a handful of young pilots who put their lives on the line virtually every time they got airborne. They operated over the

northern-most part of South Vietnam, along the so-called DMZ or demilitarized zone, either alone or with a second crewman, often, amazingly enough, venturing into North Vietnam searching out targets and directing artillery or air strikes against them. The only Army Bird Dog company to bear the Marine designation of Tactical Air Coordinator (Airborne), they supported both Army and Marine infantry, often spelling survival for embattled American or Vietnamese troops. They went to war the hard way, with nothing more than 217 hp, a radio and a map. With the exception of a handgun and a M16, they were unarmed. But as the Vietcong learned, once the Catkillers had located their target and marked it with their smoke rockets, they could bring a formidable arsenal to bear. From rolling artillery barrages to successive flights of Phantoms or Skyhawks, all the FAC had to say was "Hit my smoke," and a carpet of destruction would descend upon enemy troops, sometimes within tens of metres of friendly positions. A handful of aviation memoirs from the Vietnam War truly stand out - 'Thud Ridge' and 'Chickenhawk' to name just two. Jim Hooper's 'history' of the 220th Reconnaissance Airplane Company will become another classic, packed as it is with accounts of rare heroism and thrilling flying action. In these days of unmanned drones, it almost beggars belief that the Catkiller FACs flew low and slow in some of the most heavily defended airspace in the history of aerial warfare. 'A Hundred Feet Over Hell' is a must read for all with an interest in military aviation.

5.0 out of 5 stars **Wonderful**, 25 Aug 2009

By [Mr. Jonathan R. Charlesworth](#) (Ware,Herts, UK) -

An excellent book on an aspect of the Vietnam conflict that I have not found covered before. Highly recommended

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**Amazon Customer Reviews - France**

5.0 étoiles sur 5 **Des hommes et leurs zincs**, 18 juillet 2011

Par [Scipio](#) - [Voir tous mes commentaires](#)

A l'âge des drones et des satellites de surveillance, des pilotes dans leurs vieilles zincs monomoteurs ressemblent à des protagonistes audacieux d'une ère éloignée.

C'est à la mémoire des aviateurs - ironiquement appelés « Catkillers » - que l'auteur et correspondant de guerre Jim Hooper élève un monument. Il décrit les expériences de combat quasiment oubliées des contrôleurs aériens avancés et leurs observateurs au-dessus la zone démilitarisée entre le Nord et le Sud du Viêt Nam où ils s'acquittaient de leurs missions extraordinaires et dangereuses dans de petites avions de reconnaissance, modèle Cessna O-1 Bird Dog.

Volant à moins de 200 km/h, les équipages et leurs zincs devenaient

souvent victimes de la défense antiarienne de l'ennemi. A basse altitude et souvent en rase-mottes, ils repéraient et marquaient des objectifs ennemis, bombardés ensuite par des avions de combat ou canardés par des salves d'artillerie. Au besoin, ces aviateurs et leurs observateurs attaquaient le Vietcong à coups de fusil d'assaut en tirant par la fenêtre latérale pour soutenir des Marines au sol plombés dans une situation scabreuse. Cette histoire incroyable et d'autres sont présentées de première main dans un langage authentique et pathétique. Le lecteur se croit placé dans des cockpits étouffants dans le ciel du Viêt Nam, secoué sur les pistes poussiéreuses des aérodromes provisoires et logé dans les quartiers sentant moisi sur des bases souvent canonnées par l'ennemi. Hooper réussit à faire le portrait vivant d'une communauté d'aviateur dont l'esprit de camaraderie exceptionnel résulte des rigueurs et des impératifs d'une guerre.

4.0 étoiles sur 5 **A hundred feet over hell**, 5 janvier 2013

Par

**Astrid** - [Voir tous mes commentaires](#)

**Achat vérifié**([De quoi s'agit-il ?](#))

**Ce commentaire fait référence à cette édition : [A Hundred Feet Over Hell: Flying With the Men of the 220th Recon Airplane Company Over I Corps and the DMZ, Vietnam 1968-1969 \(Format Kindle\)](#)**

Domage que ce livre ne soit pas traduit en Français.. Cette histoire mérite d'être mieux connue dans le monde francophone.

TRANSLATION:

At the age of drones and satellites monitoring , drivers in their old single-engine zincs like bold protagonists of a distant era.

This is in memory of the airmen - ironically called " Catkillers " - the author and war correspondent Jim Hooper raises a monument. It describes the experiences of almost forgotten battle forward air controllers and observers over the demilitarized zone between North and South Vietnam where they performed their extraordinary and dangerous missions in small reconnaissance aircraft, Cessna model O-1 Bird Dog.

Driving less than 200 km / h , crews and their zincs often became victims of anti-Arian defense of the enemy. At low altitude and often hedgehopping they repéraient objective and marked enemies, then bombed by warplanes or canardés by salvos of artillery . If necessary, these airmen and their observers the Vietcong attacked with rifle assault rifle by pulling the side window to support Marines on the ground sealed in a ticklish situation. This incredible story and others are presented first hand in an authentic and pathetic language. The reader feels invested in stifling cockpits in the sky of Vietnam shook

the dusty tracks provisional airfields and housed in the musty smelling areas on bases often canonnières by the enemy. Hooper manages to make a living portrait of a community aviator whose exceptional spirit of camaraderie resulting from the rigors and demands of war.

### Blog Reviews

<http://historymike.blogspot.co.uk/2010/04/book-review-hundred-feet-over-hell.html>

Hooper's *A Hundred Feet Over Hell* chronicles the Vietnam War experience of the Catkillers, a group of aviators who made up the U.S. Army's 220th Reconnaissance Airplane Company. The Catkillers flew the Cessna O-1G "Bird Dog" at speeds of only 100 miles an hour in reconnaissance missions over and near the DMZ to locate NVA troops and call in artillery and air strikes in support of army and marine units.

Flying slow aircraft with little firepower is dangerous enough in wartime, but the men of the 220th regularly flew in areas in which North Vietnamese troops possessed advanced anti-aircraft weapons. It is difficult for a 21st century observer - in the age of remote digital warfare - to comprehend the sheer audacity these pilots exhibited in their frequently deadly missions, and as Hooper pointed out, luck is the only reason more Catkillers did not perish in combat.

Hooper followed a roughly chronological approach in his history of the Catkillers in the years 1968-69. The book consists of interviews with participants in Catkiller missions interspersed with historical narrative, and some of the quotes are especially compelling. Catkiller Bill Hooper recalled one harrowing moment in an emergency field hospital:

*As they were rolling me this way and that to take the X-rays, I remember hearing someone scream every few moments. I was thinking I was better off than some poor bastard there, until it registered that I was the one screaming.*

*A Hundred Feet Over Hell* includes a number of extras, including a section of photographs, a glossary of terms, and a well-referenced index. The book is worthy of inclusion in any library of the Vietnam War, and the insights and recollections of the profiled Catkillers offer a great deal of material to scholars interested in aerial warfare. The book is also highly recommended for general readers interested in the topic, and Hooper's literate-but-concise writing style will not bog down non-specialists.

<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/A+Hundred+Feet+over+Hell:+Flying+with+the+Men+of+the+220th+Recon...-a0208131932>

With *A Hundred Feet over Hell* by London based war correspondent and author, Jim Hooper, Zenith Press continues to offer fine military histories at a fair price. Here Hooper has interviewed survivors of the "Catkillers" of the 220th Recon Airplane Company, forward observers who spent many hours flying low and slow over hostile Vietnam in flimsy Cessna O-1 Bird Dogs in 1968 and 1969.

These young pilots strapped on their little Cessna's and flew, always at slow speeds and often at altitudes of 200 feet or less looking for and finding enemy troops before they could attack the American ground forces. Hooper sure put me in the cockpit! This book is a fine three hour read.

Richard N. Larsen, Senior Reviewer - The Free Library

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<http://bookretreat.blogspot.co.uk/2010/12/my-top-10-books-read-in-2010.html>

## My Top 10 Books Read in 2010

As the year comes to a close, I thought it would be fun to reflect on the books I most enjoyed in 2010. These weren't necessarily published this year, but I read them all this year. I'm putting them in alphabetical order because I decided I can't really rank them from one to ten since they are such different genres and I liked them for different reasons.

So, without further adieu, here are my Top 10 Books Read in 2010, with links to my reviews:

1. *A Hundred Feet Over Hell* by Jim Hooper ~ an amazingly realistic novel told from the perspective of men in the throes of the Vietnam War

*Thursday, April 1, 2010*

*A Hundred Feet Over Hell* by Jim Hooper is a very personal story about the Vietnam War experience, told mostly from the mouths of the men who lived it. The "Catkillers" of the 220th Reconnaissance Airplane Company were forward air controllers operating in the most hostile environment in Vietnam: the so-called "Demilitarized Zone," which was anything but demilitarized. These men flew in two-seat, propeller-driven Cessna O-1 Bird Dogs, at low speeds and low altitudes, directing field artillery against enemy targets and controlling air strikes. Through an extensive amount of research and numerous detailed interviews, Hooper manages to present a clear picture of life in the I Corps and DMZ during the Vietnam War ~ the battles and the personal struggles, the way these men were changed forever.

I have to start my review by saying that I highly doubt I'm the target audience for this particular book. Yes, I enjoy historical fiction and memoirs. But I would not normally pick up a true story about a war. I've read novels and memoirs related to World War II, but they were about civilians living through the war, not the military actually fighting in it. Despite all that, I really loved this book.

*A Hundred Feet Over Hell* was a much easier read than I had expected, and I felt like I really got to know these men through Hooper's storytelling. Reading this book was like watching a war movie. It was full of action "scenes" where Catkiller pilots are flying over the DMZ taking enemy fire, while relaying vital information about troop locations, and guiding fighter pilots to fire at the VC troops while avoiding the friendlies. It amazes me that these men survived in these planes that had no armor and no real weapons. Their planes were riddled with bullet holes, yet they continued to fly right into the middle of battles so they could save the men on the ground. I loved the fact that Hooper devoted an entire chapter to the perspective of those men on the ground whose lives were saved by the Catkillers.

Hooper also weaved in plenty of personal accounts of the men who were there ~ their memories of their first days, their first flights, their first kills. He described, through their



words and memories, the time they spent away from the battlefield, drinking beer, joking with each other, trying to have some normalcy in the wake of war:

We took hits, but luck saw them pass through our aircraft without striking flesh or engine, and we returned to Dong Ha to count the holes, play a few hands of poker, and prepare the next day's mission. War was our life. It was what we did. ~ p45

There is a lot of jargon in the book, so Hooper provides a glossary in the back. But I only referred to it a few times. I didn't find it difficult to keep up with the acronyms and military terminology at all. If you enjoy war movies and stories, I highly recommend this book. And if you are a history buff, especially if you're interested in the Vietnam War, I'd say this is a must read. The first-person accounts make you feel like you're part of the action!

My Rating: 5/5

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<http://savvyverseandwit.com/category/review/best-of-2010>

## My Best Reads of 2010

DECEMBER 31, 2010 BY SERENA

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It's that time of year again when I reveal what my favorite reads from the year are. Instead of talking about the books I disliked, I'm just going to focus on those that I really enjoyed out of the more than 100 books I read this year and break them down by category. You can click on titles for my reviews.

For the **Best Nonfiction 2010**, I selected 2 out of 6 I read:

1. [A Hundred Feet Over Hell](#) by Jim Hooper

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JULY 23, 2010 BY SERENA

**Jim Hooper's [A Hundred Feet Over Hell](#)** is a true account of the 220th Reconnaissance Airplane Company, with which his brother Bill served as one of the Myth Makers flying single-engine Cessnas that were extremely vulnerable to artillery and other ground fire. These men were charged with flying over hot zones and locating the enemy for bombers, giving precise coordinates for dropping bombs and napalm.

*"Rather than sharing our joy at his return, Bill was angry. Not because of the crippling wound received in an unpopular war — he accepted that as part of what he had signed on for. The anger came from being here. In a demonstration of uncompromising loyalty over logic, it was, he believed, a betrayal of the warrior family he'd left behind." (Page xi)*

Hooper has captured the essence of these men and their time in Vietnam from their crazy stunts to the moments when they feared for their lives. Through alternating points of view the stories unfold quickly as one man feeds off and expands on the story being told by their friend and colleague. Readers will meet characters like Doc Clement and Charlie Finch, but these men are not characters, but real human beings who lived through the harsh realities of war.

*"Bill Hooper: . . . I can't remember more of that day, save weeping in the privacy of my room. Perhaps the saddest thing of all was that I would learn to be unemotional about killing, eventually joining others who were very good at it." (Page 23)*

Hooper pulls no punches in the organization of this book and doesn't seem to modify the military language these men used on a regular basis; some examples include VC for Viet Cong and DMZ

for demilitarized zone, which is clearly a misnomer, to the lesser known terms DASC for Direct Air Support Control Center and Kit Carson scout for those former Viet Cong recruited to assist with counterintelligence. Readers of military history and fiction are likely to understand many of these acronyms and terms easily, but others may have to refer to the provided glossary. However, once they get a grip on the terminology, readers will plunge into the narrative easily, getting to know each of the soldiers and how they coped with the war.

*[A Hundred Feet Over Hell](#)* by [Jim Hooper](#) will remind readers of those in-the-field journalistic interviews with soldiers and those documentaries where one soldier begins a story only to be continued by another soldier, providing a deeper impact. Each man shares their fears, their triumphs, and their more embarrassing moments. One of the best books about the Vietnam War, not about infantry.

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<http://diaryofanecentric.wordpress.com/2011/01/04/the-best-books-i-read-in-2010/>

### *The Best Books I Read in 2010*

January 4, 2011 by [Anna \(Diary of an Eccentric\)](#)

I managed to read 116 books in 2010, slightly less than the 126 that I [read in 2009](#), but quality is more important than quantity. I wanted to spotlight just 10 of these books as the best I read in 2010, but I ended up with 13 and just couldn't figure out which ones to cut. In no particular order, here are my favorites of the books I read last year:

#### *Review: A Hundred Feet Over Hell by Jim Hooper*

June 22, 2010 by [Anna \(Diary of an Eccentric\)](#)

*'Just watch me, I'm going back down!' Hooper chopped the throttle and crossed the controls. These were the enemy, he kept telling himself, and this is what he was here for. Recovering from the slip, he broke toward the bodies and cross over them at seventy-five feet. The transition from the war films of his youth to reality came with the sight of the first crumpled figure. Only feet away a smaller body lay face down in the grass. He had just slaughtered a child.* (from *A Hundred Feet Over Hell*, page 22)

During the Vietnam War, Jim Hooper's brother, Bill, was a Catkiller who flew missions over [the Demilitarized Zone \(DMZ\)](#) at the border of North and South Vietnam. These Catkillers flew Cessna O-1 Bird Dogs, scoping out the area assigned to them and directing the pilots responsible for dropping napalm and various bombs to hit the intended target and avoid the U.S. soldiers on the ground. Bill Hooper learned early on that his job and that of the other Catkillers would not be easy.

'Gentlemen, this is the Cessna O-1 Bird Dog. It has no armor. It carries no offensive weapons. It is slower than the front-line fighter aircraft of the First World War. But those of you who end up flying this aircraft in combat will log more hours in your first three months than the jet jockeys will during an entire tour in Vietnam.' (page 19)

In [A Hundred Feet Over Hell: Flying With the Men of the 220th Recon Airplane Company Over I Corps and the DMZ, Vietnam 1968-1969](#), [Jim Hooper](#) tells the stories of his brother and several of the men his brother flew with and worked with during his time in Vietnam. Throughout most of the book, the men tell their stories in their own words, helping

readers better understand the stress they endured as they flew these planes right over the enemy and were shot at constantly, their sense of duty, and the friendships they forged along the way.

Hooper uses a lot of military terminology, but that shouldn't deter readers unfamiliar with the lingo. There is a glossary in the back of the book that defines many of these terms, and while I flipped back and forth many times, eventually I just stopped trying to make sense of the acronyms and allowed myself to get lost in the book. If you think a non-fiction military book about Vietnam is destined to be dry and boring, you'd be wrong.

Going back and forth between the pilots and some of the soldiers on the ground, several particularly intense scenes involve a handful of troops hunkered down, unable to move, and under intense fire from the Viet Cong. Various circumstances — being shot at, the weather, the time of day — made the Catkillers' job difficult, but despite the pressure and with the help of the men in their backseats, they saved many lives. Hooper puts you right in the plane, and my heart pounding, I rushed through the pages to see how the missions turned out. I don't know how these young men — many barely out of high school — could deal with such pressure day in and day out, but they did their jobs well and with heart.

A Hundred Feet Over Hell was difficult to read at times, but it's such an important book because it tells the true stories of these men in their own words. In addition to intense combat scenes, Hooper includes their interactions during down time, a frantic grief-stricken search when a plane is downed, and stories about crazy things they did in the air, even inserting a bit of humor here and there.

'Catkiller 1-2, request you divert to intercept and identify bogey. Over.' Thinking that Hillsboro must have confused me with a different aircraft, I asked if he understood that I was an O-1 Bird Dog capable of a max cruise of a little over one hundred knots and armed with nothing more than four white phosphorus marking rockets. The controller confirmed that he was well aware that I was an O-1 Bird Dog and how I was armed — and then gave me an intercept course.

The bogey's reported airspeed suggested a Russian helicopter, the presence of which was the subject of much rumor and speculation. They were heavily armed and considerably faster than a Bird Dog. Unless I could pop out of a cloud and ambush it with a first-pass hit, my chances of success were less than zero. The only thing that chopper crew was likely to die from that day would be laughter at the sight of my underpowered Bird Dog chugging resolutely toward them. (pages 148-149)

I haven't read too many non-fiction books about Vietnam, and I never heard of the Catkillers until I picked up this one. A Hundred Feet Over Hell is full of both action and emotion, and the first-person stories make it a must-read. Besides hearing their stories in their own words, the pictures contributed by several of the men and featured in the middle of the book made me feel as though I knew them, and I must admit that tears were shed when I learned that a few of the men I had been reading about were killed in action. It made me wonder what stories my father would tell about his time in Vietnam if he was alive today. When I closed the book, I immediately thought that my dad would want to read this, and then I had a reality check and remembered that he's been dead for over a decade and I wouldn't be able to give him my copy. Yes, the book really was that good.

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<http://bookfoolery.blogspot.co.uk/2010/05/hundred-feet-over-hell-by-jim-hooper.html>

Monday, May 24, 2010

## A Hundred Feet Over Hell by Jim Hooper

*A Hundred Feet Over Hell: Flying With the Men of the 220th Recon Airplane Company Over I Corps and the DMZ, Vietnam 1968-1969*

Copyright 2009

Zenith Press - Nonfiction/Vietnam/History

258 pages, incl. appendix, glossary and index

That night I was at Marble Mountain having a cold beer with pilots of the Black Cats helicopter company, listening to some loud rock and roll, when someone stuck his head in the club and yelled, "INCOMING!" The place suddenly emptied around me. I'd never heard of "incoming" before, so I walked outside and saw them diving into a bunker. I looked around at all the excitement and thought, "Wow, this is just like being on a movie set." About then--*kaBAM!*--a 122mm rocket hit, and I could not get into that bunker fast enough.

I was there another day, and they said, "You're going to Phu Bai." Well, I was as far north as I could go and on the coast, so I asked, "How far west is that?" and they said, "It's as far north as you can go." So back on a C-130 to Phu Bai, still on the coast. When I got to the Catkillers, they told me I was assigned to the 1st Platoon at Dong Ha. "How far west is that?" And they said, "As far north as you can go. Hell, you can see North Vietnam from there." That's when I knew I was in a world of shit.

**A Hundred Feet Over Hell** is about a group of men who flew Bird Dogs (a type of Cessna plane that flew no faster than 130 mph -- low and slow) in and near the Demilitarized Zone, or DMZ, between North and South Vietnam from 1968-69. I got my copy specifically to read for the Vietnam War Reading Challenge, and it is my favorite Vietnam read, so far. Seriously, I'm ranking it above **The Things They Carried**. Can you believe that? I can't even believe that.

**A Hundred Feet Over Hell** is nonfiction and I'm sure that will keep a few people from reading it, but if you're one of those . . . reconsider, please. It's amazing. The author's brother was one of the pilots who flew a Bird Dog and he survived a serious injury, so he is among those who tell their stories within the pages of the book. The way it's written, there is some description by the author but the vast majority of the book is written in first-person accounts of the pilots' experiences. Sometimes they overlap, so that you get to hear the same story from more than one viewpoint. In one case, one of the soldiers on the ground told his viewpoint along with at least one of the pilots who helped save him from certain death when he and his brothers in arms were surrounded.

The Catkillers were constantly under fire because of the way they flew and their low speed. Their job was to pinpoint targets, call in planes with specific artillery, mark targets with white phosphorous rockets and then report on the success of hits, often repeatedly, until the target was hit. Sometimes a pilot on his own or (more typically) a pilot and an "observer" flew over or near the DMZ on a general reconnaissance mission, in order to search for signs of the enemy to determine targets to hit for preventive measures. But, a good portion of the time they flew missions to cover soldiers on the ground or to help locate the enemy so that helicopters could extract the injured and any remaining uninjured soldiers could escape dangerous situations. They went into some very scary, very tense situations under heavy fire. These guys were courageous.

And, the real kicker is that they didn't carry weapons. Apart from a hand-held automatic weapon which they occasionally fired out of a window (and those were carried by choice, not by design), there was no weaponry on board the planes. None.

Besides being action-packed, I found that the book was very readable, although there is plenty of terminology that the novice will have to learn by flipping to the glossary and not absolutely every

strange word or weapon designation is defined. Because the book is focused on a single year, you get a pretty well-rounded view of what it was like for a pilot to live through a tour of duty, including the crazy things they did to unwind. There are a few really sad moments when pilots were killed, wounded or went missing. Because of the way the book is told, the reader gets to know the individual personalities quite well and in combination with a photograph section, it's really gut-wrenching when someone you've become acquainted with is killed or injured.

**5++++++/5** - Wow. I just can't say enough good things about this book. Well-written text combined with personal accounts so emotional, tense, frightening, moving, funny, sad and shocking that I went from holding my breath to sighing in relief to laughing to wiping away tears. This is absolutely one of the best books I've read all year.

**A Hundred Feet Over Hell** is not necessarily an easy read because of the technical aspect and I found that I enjoyed it most when I finally decided I was going to sit down and read the entire book through, but it can be read in little bits. Reading the majority in a single sitting meant details (terminology, characters, etc.) stayed fresh and made for a read with more impact.

Posted by Bookfool at 11:00 PM

<http://laughingstars.net/2010/05/01/a-hundred-feet-over-hell/>

### **A Hundred Feet Over Hell**

May 1, 2010 by laughingstars66

**A Hundred Feet Over Hell: Flying with the Men of the 220th Recon Airplane Company Over I Corps and the DMZ, Vietnam 1968-1969 by Jim Hooper**  
published by Zenith Press, 2009

I don't believe in war, but I deeply respect the people who fight it. Along with their families, they are bearing sacrifices for the rest of us. As the wife of a police officer, I've had glimpses into the world of those who serve in dangerous situations and the bonds that form among people whose lives depend on one another. But I have no experience with military life, and I was fascinated by my vicarious experiences in this book.

When Bill Hooper returned to Florida after being injured on active duty in Vietnam, he was angry. It was not a reaction to having suffered a brutal ordeal in an unpopular war. He was angry about being home. He was separated from his military family, the men he was committed to serving and protecting. At first, this was difficult for his brother Jim to understand. Decades later, after surviving his own combat experiences as a war correspondent in Africa and the Balkans, Jim began to explore Bill's Vietnam experiences. After extensive research and interviews with men who served with Bill, this book took shape.

The author seamlessly wove together first-person accounts of soldiers with his own narrative. It flowed smoothly, and I came to really care about the people whose voices filled the pages. There's also a great deal of action in this book. I agree with [another reviewer, Julie at My Book Retreat](#), who wrote: "Reading this book was like watching a war movie. It was full of action "scenes" where Catkiller pilots are flying over the DMZ taking enemy fire, while relaying vital information about troop locations, and guiding fighter pilots to fire at the VC troops while avoiding the friendlies."

Shortly after arriving in North Vietnam, Bill shot his first human targets. He was flying over an area that had been declared a Freefire Zone because the North Vietnamese used it to move weapons and supplies — anyone spotted there would be shot on sight. When he killed several people herding buffalo, a comrade shouted triumphantly, "You got both of them!" Only later, in the privacy of his room, did Bill shed tears.

Soon Bill adapted to his duties, and in time he became, in his own words, “addicted to combat.” As I became absorbed in the experiences of these men, I understood what he meant. Bill asked to be reassigned to the “Catkillers” of the U.S. Army’s 220th Reconnaissance Airplane Company where he served for the rest of his time “in country.” The Catkillers flew dangerous missions close to the ground, almost daily, providing support to ground forces. As [one reviewer, at Orvilleville](#), noted, “In the second war of the Jet Age, the Bird Dog was a very unglamorous aircraft, but to the men on the ground, having a Bird Dog overhead was like having your own personal guardian angel.” The reasons for the war they were fighting seemed unclear. But these men were passionately focused on *their* mission, to support each other and save American lives. Some parts of this book are actually laugh out loud funny. These young men escaped the pressures of combat by cutting loose during their downtime, and many of their experiences are hilarious. For example, one night a bunch of guys were in the middle of a poker game when the camp was struck by enemy fire. “Wisby was yelling at us to get to the bunker, but we just sat there because of all the cash on the table. There had to be \$500 in that pot! Rockets were impacting everywhere. Then the lights went out. Everyone had a Zippo, and we got a candle lit and finished the hand. I thought we were going to die for sure.” (p. 53)

Other parts of the book are infuriating. We see the brutality faced by both soldiers and Vietnamese civilians on a daily basis and the lack of support our serviceman received from the South Vietnamese, who they were trying to support, and from their own government. During their down time, the Catkillers were sometimes immersed in “hate sessions.” They vented about the indifference of the South Vietnamese, the baffling decisions made by the military bureaucracy, which sometimes cost the lives of their comrades in arms, and the frustrations of being caught in limited warfare, trying to save American lives but not allowed to invade North Vietnam. A news correspondent who had served in World War II was at one of these “hate sessions.” He said the experiences he’d seen in the 1940s, serviceman struggling to preserve each others lives in the face of lack of support and seemingly absurd decisions from further up the hierarchy, were being repeated “with only cosmetic differences” in Vietnam. I found this disheartening on many levels, and I suspect the same issues are being faced — again, with only cosmetic differences — by our troops in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Some accounts of war play on our emotions in a very intentional way, striving to send the obvious message that “war is hell.” Others glorify war. *A Hundred Feet Over Hell* does neither. It simply tells the soldiers’ stories, very personal stories of courage, fear, grief, and pride in a job well done, in what [David Mitchell at BiblioBuffet](#) aptly called a “concise but literate style.” This is an important work of contemporary history and a powerful tribute to men who devoted themselves to protecting their brethren.

<http://laughingstars.net>

Rating:   
(4.5/5 stars)

<http://www.bibliobuffet.com/things-said-and-done-columns-336/1261-long-ago-but-still-remembered-041810>

### *Long Ago But Still Remembered*

by

David Mitchell

Past experience is the filter through which we perceive the present. I believe that is true in all things and it is part of the reason that until this week I had never read about the Vietnam conflict.



I am old enough—just barely—to remember Vietnam. I still have a vivid memory of an *In the News* segment that ran on CBS in the mid-1970s. Sandwiched between my usual Saturday morning cartoons, I was given a two-minute dose of war news in which retreating American troops uncovered a mass grave. I still recall thinking that an eight-year-old did not really need to see a human skull slowly rolling down a hill until it came to rest next to other human body parts at the bottom.

Vietnam was ugly. Every film image that I have seen of that conflict and every veteran with whom I have spoken has reinforced that perception. By comparison, World War II was Audie Murphy writing *To Hell and Back* and then starring in the film version. It was John Wayne, Jimmy Stewart, Ted Williams. It was clean. It was heroic. It was the war that happened in black and white in which there was not a lot of blood, at least in the movies of my childhood.

Of course, in reality, war is war and it is always ugly. Nevertheless, the images of war from my youth are the images that drove me away from the study of Vietnam and towards the study of World War II. My personal experience with popular culture gave me biases that took years to erase.

Sadly, as we all know, the generation of World War II is dwindling in number. Soon the men and women who fought in Korea will begin to diminish and then the ranks of Vietnam veterans will follow. With that in mind, I determined that it was time that I paid tribute to the soldiers who fought in Southeast Asia forty to sixty years ago in battles that rarely are recalled today. So it was that I picked up *A Hundred Feet Over Hell: Flying with the Men of the 220th Recon Airplane Company Over I Corps and the DMZ, Vietnam 1968 – 1969* by Jim Hooper, in the hope that I might connect with some of those aging soldiers.

Hooper is a combat journalist with impressive credentials. He has covered wars throughout Africa and the Balkans, been wounded twice and captured by extremists. He is also a storyteller, weaving his own brief narrative with the words of the many members of the 220th that he interviewed (including his brother), Hooper allows the men of the 220th to tell their own story, a story that really was unique to the conflict in Vietnam. The men of the 220th—the “Catkillers”—flew single engine Cessna planes at low altitudes over the DMZ, the inaccurately named “Demilitarized Zone” between North and South Vietnam. Flying well within reach of small arms fire and heavier anti-aircraft artillery, the Catkillers faced the enemy with a bravery and élan that would not be seen again because today their job would be done by an unmanned drone instead of young men flying two-seater planes. As Hooper describes them:

Flying 100-mile-per-hour Cessnas, vulnerable to every weapon in the enemy’s arsenal, they patrolled the most violently contested real estate on earth. Bullet and shrapnel holes in their tiny airplanes warranted little more than shrugs; maintenance crews riveted neat aluminum patches, and the next morning aircraft and boy pilots were again over the guns. As one commanding officer would write many years later: “Those who flew these missions were unique: self-reliant, aggressive, determined and tenacious. And because they were virtually on their own from take-off to landing, it also required a personality bordering on controlled recklessness.” It is little surprise that their combat record was viewed with wonder. Insiders called them the Myth Makers.

Hooper first learned of the experiences of the Catkillers when his brother Bill returned from service in as a flyer in the 220th. Severely wounded in action, Bill Hooper gave his brother a hint of war when he opened up to him over a bottle of whiskey soon after he returned from several months of recovering from his wounds. That was several decades ago but it was not until Hooper had experienced combat himself, as a freelance journalist and photographer, that he felt he could adequately explore the experiences that his brother and the other Catkillers had faced.

Hooper interviewed as many of the surviving Catkillers as he could locate and compiled their stories—both the good and the bad—without judgment. That is one of the greatest strengths of *A Hundred Feet Over Hell*. He allows his readers to get to know the men of the 220th through their own words and to form their own opinions. The reader hears from men who risked their lives by flying extra missions to men who trumped up justification for medals just so that they could advance in the service. Hooper presents the stories of flyers who died while doing their duty and flyers who would pretend that their radios were broken and then land on abandoned airstrips and get stoned when they should have been flying missions. Incompetent officers appear in the same pages as hardworking ground crews. As a result, the reader gets a true sense of the human interaction, and interdependence, that soldiers in the 220th experienced.

Providing air cover for isolated American troops in contact with their North Vietnamese enemies, the Catkillers would direct artillery and aerial bombardment against the NVA while directing American troops to safety. After one such mission, in which Catkiller Doc Clement had called for napalm bombs close to American troops who were at risk of being overrun, Clement recalled encountering the troops he had saved back at his base::

They looked like Hell warmed over, all of them covered in mud and dust, a couple of them with singed hair from the napalm, their fatigues in shreds. They crowded around us, shaking our hands and thanking us. Then one of them said, "When we saw you that low with tracers all around your plane, we were sure you were going to get shot down, and that would be the end of our air cover. We couldn't believe that you kept doing it. If that's what your job is like lieutenant, you'll never get me in one of those Bird Dogs. No way!"

They experienced the incompetence of superior officers and the insanity of war being fought by and at times less than professional army corps. They found ways to deal with the killing and ways to deal with the ever-present risk of being killed. Games of poker, heavy drinking and bar games were common but sometimes the Catkillers would get particularly creative, even at the risk of punishment. On Christmas Eve, 1968, for example, two Catkillers took an unplanned trip out to the USS *New Jersey* for what they intended would be a two-hour visit. They ended up staying for three days during which time they were absent without leave.

They were young men who had their youth stolen and in some ways they were men who would never grow up. Bill Hooper, the author's brother, returned home and faced a series of reconstructive surgeries that lasted eight months to repair an arm that was shattered by shrapnel. "Word got around that I'd been pretty badly hurt in Vietnam," he recalls. "A few weeks after starting school, a young couple with love beads and the obligatory peace emblems walked up. At first I didn't realize that they were talking to me until the boy said, 'You're nothing but a hired killer' whereupon his girlfriend spit on me. Very proud of themselves, they marched off, yelling more insults over their shoulders. I don't recall getting angry, but rather being utterly bewildered."

Had Hooper written *A Hundred Feet Over Hell* when he first heard his brother's stories of life with the Catkillers, it might have ended with Bill Hooper's bewilderment at having had someone spit on him because he had done his duty. Time has passed, however, and Hooper was able to give us post scripts to the combat lives of the men he interviewed. Many of those men have been able to put the emotional scars of war behind them to become successful attorneys and businessmen. Bill Hooper is now the President of a food equipment sales company. Reading of the lives of the Catkillers after the Vietnam conflict may be the source of my greatest pleasure in reading this book.

*A Hundred Feet Over Hell* is the dramatic story of a few men who fought in a war that I am sure that they did not understand at the time. The book presents the Vietnam conflict as it was experienced, both the good and the bad, by the Catkillers. The conflict in Vietnam, like every other conflict in which human life is lost, will always be an ugly conflict, but the heroism of some of its participants and their will to survive against all odds is inspiring. Until I picked up *A Hundred Feet Over Hell*, I had never heard of the Catkillers. Now I will never forget them.

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<http://falkeeinsgreatplanes.blogspot.com/2010/03/book-review-hundred-feet-over-hell-by.html>

MONDAY, 1 MARCH 2010

## A hundred feet over Hell by Jim Hooper - Recommended Aviation books (1)

A military adaptation of a 1950s design that first saw service during the Korean War, the Cessna Bird Dog was already rather long in the tooth by the time of the Vietnam war. However in the Forward Air Control role the Bird Dog managed to get into far more scrapes than many other



far more glamorous combat machines. Although it was a flimsy parasol-winged light aircraft barely capable of 100 mph, the Bird Dog over Vietnam spent most of its time in the early years of the conflict in the air stooging around over the jungle, spotting and sighting within range of every enemy weapon on the battlefield. Author Jim Hooper's brother flew one and this is his story and that of his unit, the 220th Reconnaissance Airplane Company, the 'Catkillers'. It is the tale of a handful of young pilots who put their lives on the line virtually every time they got airborne. They operated over the northern-most part of South Vietnam, along the so-called DMZ or demilitarized zone, either alone or with a second crewman, often, amazingly enough, venturing into North Vietnam searching out targets and directing artillery or air strikes against them. The only Army Bird Dog company to bear the Marine designation of Tactical Air Coordinator (Airborne), they supported both Army and Marine infantry, often spelling survival for embattled American or Vietnamese troops. They went to war the hard way, with nothing more than 217 hp, a radio and a map. With the exception of a handgun and a M16, they were unarmed. But as the Vietcong learned, once the Catkillers had located their target and marked it with their smoke rockets, they could bring a formidable arsenal to bear. From rolling artillery barrages to successive flights of Phantoms or Skyhawks, all the FAC had to say was "Hit my smoke," and a carpet of destruction would descend upon enemy troops, sometimes within tens of metres of friendly positions.

A handful of aviation memoirs from the Vietnam War truly stand out - 'Thud Ridge' and 'Chickenhawk' to name just two. Jim Hooper's 'history' of the 220th Reconnaissance Airplane Company will become another classic, packed as it is with accounts of rare heroism and thrilling flying action. In these days of unmanned drones, it almost beggars belief that the Catkiller FACs flew low and slow in some of the most heavily defended airspace in the history of aerial warfare. 'A Hundred Feet Over Hell' is a must read for all with an interest in military aviation.

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<http://aviationbookreviews.com/43rd-review-a-hundred-feet-over-hell-jim-hooper-compelling-amazing-courage-vietnam/>

The Vietnam war, which was in many ways an exceptional war – for the US, that is – ended some 40 years ago, but really good books about it continue to be published. The famous Chickenhawk by ex-UH-1 pilot Robert Mason came out in 1984. Karl Marlantes published his 'Matterhorn' in 2010, but we will leave this on the side for the moment, along with all the other recent Vietnam war books, while we concentrate here on 'A Hundred Feet over Hell'. This is a book by Jim Hooper which came out in 2009 and is about a group of reconnaissance pilots belonging to the 220<sup>th</sup> Aviation Company. In this page-turner, Hooper has very cleverly added a 'wannahave' to the 'best of' spectrum of aviation books.

The author takes us back to 1968-1969 and to Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) along the Ben Hai river, which formed the border between North and South Vietnam. His brother, Bill Hooper, served in that part of the US Army which was known as the 'Catkillers', or, to give its correct title: the 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon of the 220<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Aviation Company. Bill flew missions from Dong Ha in the military variant of the Cessna 170. His mandate was primarily surveillance, reconnaissance and close air support along the DMZ. I can hear you thinking: "close air support missions in a Cessna?!" Well, yes! I reiterate: close air support missions in a Cessna. We are talking about the military version of the Cessna which was known as then as 'O-1 Bird Dog' ('O' as in 'Observation'). The author gives his brother a central spot in the book, but the book is actually an ode to all Catkillers who had to operate in very tricky circumstances.

So what did this unit do? In a nutshell: their prime task was to coordinate air support to American ground troops. This sounds simple, but the conditions they had to operate in varied from the relatively straightforward to the positively nightmarish where the ground troops found themselves between a rock and a hard place with the North Vietnamese army on one side and the bombardment of Vietnamese objectives on the other. Soldiers and objectives of the North Vietnamese army were fired upon by the Bird Dogs.

So what was it actually like? Ground troops often requested support from the Bird Dogs. "How on earth can Cessna aircraft provide support?" I hear you ask, but the Cessna crews were of enormous help to their colleagues on the ground. The Bird Dog pilots facilitated the bombing of enemy objectives in various ways. Often the target would be marked by a phosphorus rocket fired from an O-1. The rocket would explode and give off a white smoke. Then the Marines' fighter planes of the Direct Air Support Center (DASC) in Dong Ha would sweep in and douse the enemy with 'nape' (napalm) and other nasties.

A second tactic was to pass on the enemy coordinates to the canon batteries aboard the USS New Jersey in South Vietnam, a battle ship which had first seen service in World War II. These massive long-range guns fired shells which were more than 40 cm thick! Because the Bird Dogs usually flew fairly close to the action they often took hits from the North Vietnamese in wings, fuselage or worse. This explains why 469 Bird Dogs were lost during the course of the Vietnam war.

To today's reader in our high tech age where we can fire shells and bombs from a safe distance, it is difficult to perceive just how crucial the role played by the Cessna in Vietnam was. Can you imagine yourself -nowadays- in a Cessna, tearing through flying enemy bullets whilst you call in F-16s? Eventually Bill Hooper also ran into problems. You can hear his mayday call on <http://www.catkillers.org/history-miracle1969.htm>. You can also find more info on this site about the Catkillers.

I enjoyed the striking description of the embarrassing medal chasing of a few higher officers but was also touched by the story of Neil the pilot who buckled under the pressure of the missions and their accompanying emotional terrors.

The writer interviewed manifold pilots, observers who sat in the back, Bird Dog crews, ground crew staff and ground troop officers. All the stories and memories thus gathered were then creatively meshed together in the creation of this brilliant book. Aside from the exciting and fascinating content, Jim Hooper's work draws you into the very cockpit by writing in the first person. You could not get any closer to the fighting, the stress, the exhaustion, the bravery and the adrenalin. A good set of maps in the beginning of the book helps you pinpoint names and locations. In spite of not having flown himself in this war, Jim Hooper has succeeded in producing a cracking read which places him right up there with the likes of Robert Mason!

**Rene Verjens**

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In their own words some of the men of the 220th Reconnaissance Airplane Company, the "Catkillers", share their harrowing experiences operating in Vietnam. As forward air controllers, these young pilots' mission, flying two-seater Cessnas, was to find the enemy and direct field artillery fire or air strikes against the targets.

This unit operated in the Demilitarized Zone in I Corps, the northern-most combat zone in South Vietnam in 1968-69. Coming under fire on virtually every mission and returning to base with their aircraft peppered with bullet holes, the Catkillers flew at about 100 miles an hour and often dropped to treetop level to make their observations.

The men at the controls were a unique blend of self-reliant, aggressive, tenacious flyers who were determined to perform their mission to support the ground troops no matter the risk involved. Insiders referred to them as the "Myth Makers", for their exploits were the stuff myth was made of and what they accomplished defied comprehension and belief.

Jim Hooper, whose brother flew with the unit, has received numerous accolades for this story from many of those who served in Vietnam and were directly or indirectly affected by the Catkillers' missions. As one former veteran writes, Hooper did a remarkable job of providing the sights and sounds of the conflict. Tom Wilson says the book provided him with a "verbal flashback" that "made me breathe harder and brought a tear to my eye".

Bookideas.com

<http://orville.blogspot.co.uk/2009/11/hundred-feet-over-hell.html>

Today, on Veteran's Day I would like to salute my father, Tim Davenport and my uncle, Tim Cain. They are both veterans of the Vietnam war. I can say from personal experience that these two men sacrificed more than their share with their service to our country and I am very proud of both of them. While I am sorry to say I don't know the missions my uncle was assigned to, my dad was a Bird Dog pilot, flying low level reconnaissance missions over enemy territory. Dad gave me a book a little while back that does a great job of explaining what his days were like back then. I haven't gotten to finish it but have enjoyed what I have read. Here is an excerpt from it...

Jim Hooper's "A Hundred Feet Over Hell" is the story of his brother's Vietnam War experiences flying the O-1 Bird Dog Observation Aircraft. Bill Hooper was a Tactical Air Controller - Airborne, or a TACA. He flew this low-flying, slow-speed aircraft with the 220th Reconnaissance Aircraft Company, a unit known by their call-sign "Catkillers". In the second war of the Jet Age, the Bird Dog was a very unglamorous aircraft, but to the men on the ground, having a Bird Dog overhead was like having your own personal guardian angel. Hooper's book does an outstanding job of documenting the contributions of the Catkillers between 1968 and 1969.

"A Hundred Feet Over Hell" is a very personal story told by the men who lived the war. Hooper does an amazing job telling the story of how these aviators called in airstrikes in support of ground troops. After reading the book, the reader gains a new appreciation for the difficulty of simultaneous flying a plane; describing a target to a jet aircraft traveling four times as fast and 10,000 feet higher than you; and avoiding ground fire. American aviators were the best in this lethal business.

[https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/6458023-a-hundred-feet-over-hell#other\\_reviews](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/6458023-a-hundred-feet-over-hell#other_reviews)

A personal and detailed account of a little known combat aviation element in Vietnam. Books I've read about LRRP and Marine Recon teams in the war make reference to brave observation pilots who, by directing air strikes, artillery, and medevac helicopters, pulled their ground-bound brethren's chestnuts out of the fire. The personal angle makes the book far more interesting (to me) than an academic history. One becomes better acquainted with the concerns and diversions of the young men who regularly faced the North Vietnamese, armed with nothing more than marking rockets.

Goodreads

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<http://www.librarything.com/work/8428824/reviews>

A handful of aviation memoirs from the Vietnam War truly stand out. Jack Broughton's *Thud Ridge* details the extraordinary courage of US Air force pilots facing North Vietnam's deadly air defenses. Robert Mason's *Chickenhawk* carries the reader on a gut-wrenching journey from flight school to helicopter assaults under heavy enemy fire. *The Ravens* by Christopher Robbins reveals the CIA's secret war in Laos. Taking its place among these classics is Jim Hooper's *A Hundred Feet Over Hell*, the story of the 220<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Airplane Company. The 'Catkillers' flew 100mph Cessnas from Phu Bai and Dong Ha to cover the Ashau Valley and DMZ, where, within range of every enemy weapon on the battlefield, they called in artillery and air strikes to support army and marine units fighting the NVA. In these days of unmanned Predators and Reapers, it is astonishing to learn that the Catkiller FACs even took their single-engine Bird Dogs into North Vietnam in search of targets. For those interested in military aviation and tales of raw heroism, *A Hundred Feet Over Hell* is a must read.

Library Thing  
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<http://www.vietnamgear.com/archive/2.aspx>

What sort of man actually chooses to fly very low and very very slow over enemy positions in a plane with neither protective armor nor weaponry?

In this impressive book, author Jim Hooper allows such remarkable men to tell their stories in their own words. The result of fifteen years of research and numerous interviews, 'A Hundred Feet Over Hell' gives an insight into the life of a Catkiller in Vietnam – flying over I Corps and the DMZ as part of the 220th Recon Airplane Company.

To describe being a Catkiller as highly dangerous would be a serious understatement. The only armor available to pilots were non-bullet-proof flak jackets, otherwise all that stood between them and the enemy's fire was the thin metal skin of their tiny 100 mile per hour Cessna Bird Dog plane.

A relic of the Korean War, the O-1 Bird Dog was also unarmed, apart from white phosphorous marking rockets. Consequently, when other means of support were unavailable, pilots often resorted to firing an M16 rifle or pistol out of the window to try and pin down enemy troops. Needless to say, this practice was not officially authorized!

Brave as they were, the pilots were not always alone. They were often accompanied by an Army or Marine Corps observer for better communication with the ground elements they were tasked with supporting. Such spotters became affectionately known as GIB - Guy in the Back.

So many of the Catkiller stories detailed in 'A Hundred Feet Over Hell' are genuinely astonishing. For instance, there's the night mission to locate a Marine recon team in heavy contact with North Vietnamese troops. Despite flying in the pitch black and in

hazardous mountainous terrain, the pilot picked out their tiny red marker light and was able to direct the fire of Navy aircraft, saving the Marines from being overrun.

There's also the story of the author's brother Bill, who, after being badly hit, had to fly for almost twenty minutes with a severely damaged arm that was sending him into shock. Fighting the almost overwhelming desire to sleep, he somehow managed to land his plane back at Dong Ha airstrip, not only saving his own life but also that of his observer, Bill Norton.

Containing plenty of action, but also humour and some sadness, *A Hundred Feet Over Hell* is an engrossing and worthwhile read

VietnamGear.com

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