



220th Aviation Company

(Surveillance Airplane Light)

(Reconnaissance Airplane)

(Utility Airplane)



"Catkillers" and Family, and all Friends and brothers in Arms, in memory of those who have served.



MEMORIES FROM A TECH INSPECTOR

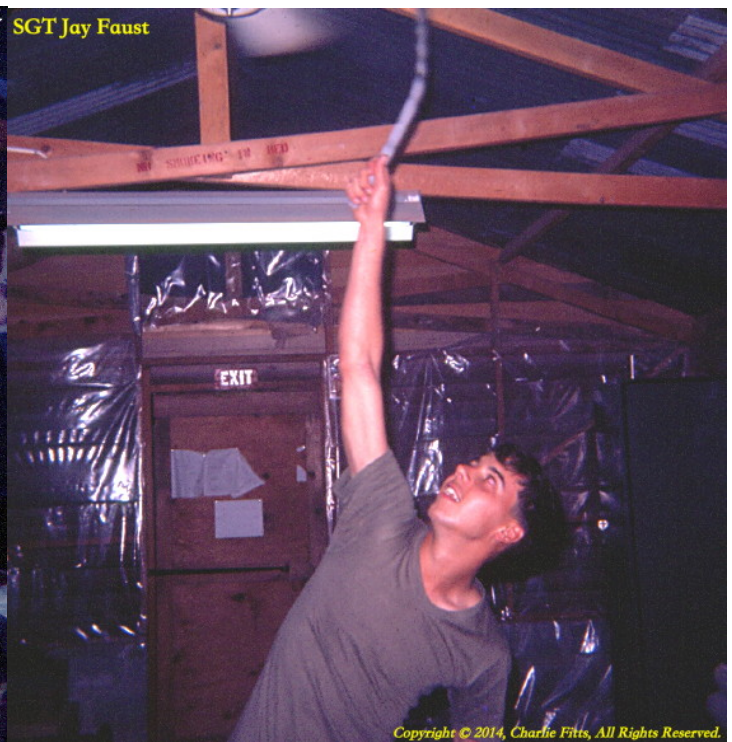
BY SP5 CHARLIE FITTS, NOVEMBER 1967—JUNE 1969

Arranged and edited by Dennis Currie

I got into the Army from the Air Force, sort of. I'd taken two years of AFROTC classes at U-Conn before I dropped out and enlisted. I'd scored in the 98th percentile on the navigator portion of the Air Force Officer Qualification Test, which is a timed test where you have to match up as many pairs of photos as you can, taken of the same targets from different distances, directions, and elevations. So I'd been thinking of aviation as a career. I also had the top average score on the AFROTC rifle team in my freshman year, so I also liked to shoot.

I'd also borrowed money to get a 350 horsepower corvette engine for my '57 Chevy. Possibly correlated with this, my marks in school weren't all that great and I was in danger of losing my deferment. There was no local Air Force recruiter so I went in and talked with the Army recruiter. They were offering a 120 day delayed enlistment program, which would give me time to pay off that corvette engine before starting basic training. The recruiter couldn't offer me anything like a Birdog navigator job but he was looking for people interested in learning to be single engine airplane mechanics. Hey! Maybe the Army would teach me how to fly! Sure. Sign me up. I found out later that enlisted men couldn't be pilots. Oh well.

The guy I hung around with most during my stay with the 220th was Jay Faust. He and Jim Toschlog and Frank Fetera stopped to see me here in Connecticut sometime around 1972 or so. Frank was in the engine shop down at the hangar (I think he was in charge of the engine shop crew) and I forget now if Jim was in the engine shop also or if he worked on the hangar floor. Jay worked on the hangar floor and I think he was in charge of one of the periodic inspection crews. I haven't heard from any of those guys in years.



I drove the POL (petroleum, oil, and lubricants) truck for a while. It looked like a home fuel oil delivery truck but held 115/145 octane aviation gasoline. That was my first job when I came into the company after I was assigned to the flight line. I remember riding shotgun on the POL truck the day before Hue was overrun during Tet in '68. One of the supply sergeants drove (can't remember his name) and we took a load of avgas up to the platoon in Hue to top off their fuel bladder. Guess they didn't get to use much of it. I remember seeing the citizens of Hue scurrying around, and thinking that they must know that something was coming up.

Thinking of the POL truck brought back another memory. We used to degrease the bird engines by filling an "Indian tank," a type of hand pump with avgas and spraying the engines with it! One day I eliminated the middle step (filling up the hand pump with gas from the POL truck) and turned the nozzle of the POL truck directly on an engine. This worked fine, but the resulting puddle kind of made a soft spot in the tarmac in front of the line shack that was still there months later.

Graduating from POL truck driver to hangar maintenance team mechanic, I then worked with the hanger crew for a while. Then I became maintenance clerk. After a few months of that I could recite from memory, in numerical order, the entire list of aircraft tail numbers for the company. Then I extended for another tour, went home on leave, and came back to the tech inspector's job.

A tech inspector's job is to both inspect aircraft and also to inspect and sign off repairs after they are made, and often, to ride along on the test flight. Every hundred flight hours the planes were required to undergo a thorough inspection. Some planes were flying a hundred hours a month, and our total company inventory averaged around 30 planes. When a plane came in for inspection, one of the crews would take out the seats and open all the inspection panels. Then either myself or the other tech inspector, Ernie Burns, would start at one corner of the plane and look at everything. Paying special attention to things that could rust, bust, crack, corrode, or come loose. It took about an hour. Then the crews would fix any "gigs" and the plane would get another identical inspection by the other tech inspector. A "gig" was a term we used in maintenance to describe any non conformance to standard or damage to the aircraft. Any new gigs found would be fixed and the plane buttoned back up. We could complete most hundred-hour inspections in a day and there were two separate maintenance crews for when it got really busy.

The combination of a sandy environment, and high-octane fuel, that the engines weren't originally designed for, was hard on the engines. Engines would typically develop excessive oil consumption after about 300 hours. Regulations decreed that we could only replace the cylinders once before the whole engine needed to be replaced. With some planes flying a hundred hours a month, we replaced a lot of cylinders and engines. And each of these required a test flight afterwards. We tried to make engine repairs coincide with routine inspections to minimize downtime, but that wasn't always possible.

Due to congestion, a hectic environment, and just plain mistakes, there were a number of accidents. I remember the day an Air Vietnam crashed and I can still see it in my mind's eye. I happened to be standing out in front of the hangar and saw it come in. It was very slow, nose high, and the engines were turning over so slowly you could count the blades. Not a normal looking landing. It looked like the pilot was attempting a full stall landing! However, he touched down just short of the runway and there was a sharp 18" to 24" drop off there. The wheels hit so hard the wings flapped! The left main landing gear either collapsed or broke off and the left wing dropped to the runway. I can still see the props continuing to turn and bend backward as the plane slid along. Fortunately it was clear of the runway when it stopped sliding. I think it was Bob Lewin who was in the line shack then who "rescued" a couple of the seats so visitors to the line shack could relax more comfortably. I think he also "rescued" some of the avionics but then didn't know what to do with the stuff.

Phu Bai Airport



Lip that an Air Vietnam aircraft landed short and hit, caused its crash

Edge Of Runway 18" Drop Off Photo

Air Vietnam crash site
Phu Bai Airport



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Aircraft Wreckage Photo



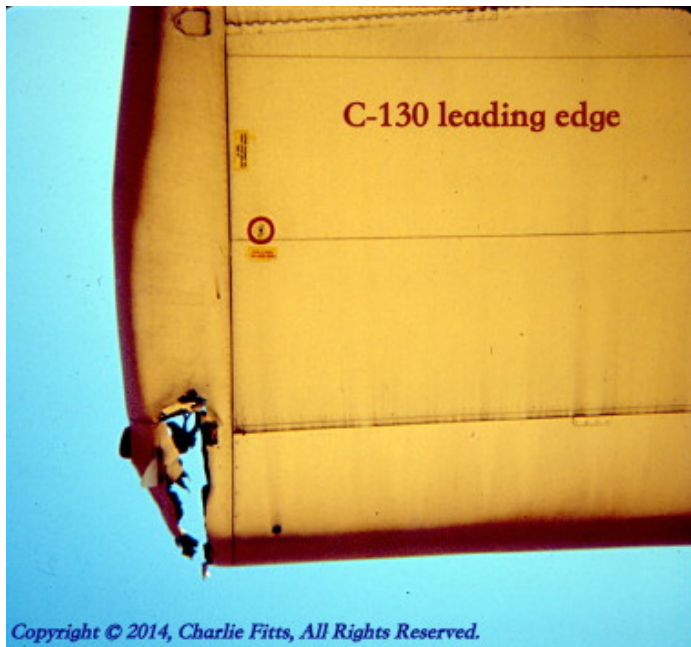
Air Vietnam Aftermath Engines

There was another time when I was walking down to the hangar early one morning to take over for the overnight guard so he could go get some breakfast, when a C-130 tried to taxi past the hangar. He got a little too close and hit the I-beam in the front corner of the hangar with his wing tip. Put a deep gouge the width of one of those rusty old metal beams framing the doorway in the leading edge of the wing.



Charlie Fitts On Guard Duty

They just threw the C-130 props into reverse and backed out of the hangar. Afterwards, the pilot walked over to me as I was sitting there guarding the hangar and apologized to me for damaging the hangar! It was hard for me to keep a straight face at the time - both because he was an officer and I think I was an SP/4, and because he probably would have done us a favor to knock the hangar down! They never bothered to fix the kink in the hangar.



C-130 Wing Damage From Hangar



Hangar Dent



CH-34 Collides With C-130

In another incident, a CH-34 pilot thought his rotor was low enough to taxi under a C-130 wing. He was right, up to a

point. But the helicopter rolled to a stop right under the wing and he pulled a little pitch to get it moving again, flexing the rotor up into the wing. BAPBAPBAPBAP! He did good to get it shut down before it came apart. The transmission was wrecked and the main rotor was jumping up and down.

One birddog ground looped and we put another wing on it, and another came back from a mission missing the left main wheel and strut. Apparently, while flying near another helicopter, a rotor blade was somehow broken off and the blade clipped the birddog landing gear resulting in the damage. The pilot put it down as gently as he could in the sand near the runway but that plane was too bent up to fix. I'd love to hear the real story that goes along with the missing landing gear!



Ground Loop O-1



Helicopter Rotor Contact With Landing Gear

220th Aviation Company Birddog 57-2822 crash, Phu Bai
9 December 1967, flown by CPT Robert M. Cortner, Catkiller 13/28



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Missing Landing Gear Due To Helicopter

I logged several hours in the rear seat of a birddog behind John Kovach since it was part of his job as maintenance officer to test fly planes after we'd worked on them, and it was part of my job as tech inspector to go for the first ride after I'd inspected and signed off the work. Test flights were supposed to last an hour. I guess they figured if it would stay up that long, it was good to go. The scenery was beautiful to say the least and the following pictures depict a range of sights I was to see during my tour.



Phu Bai From Above



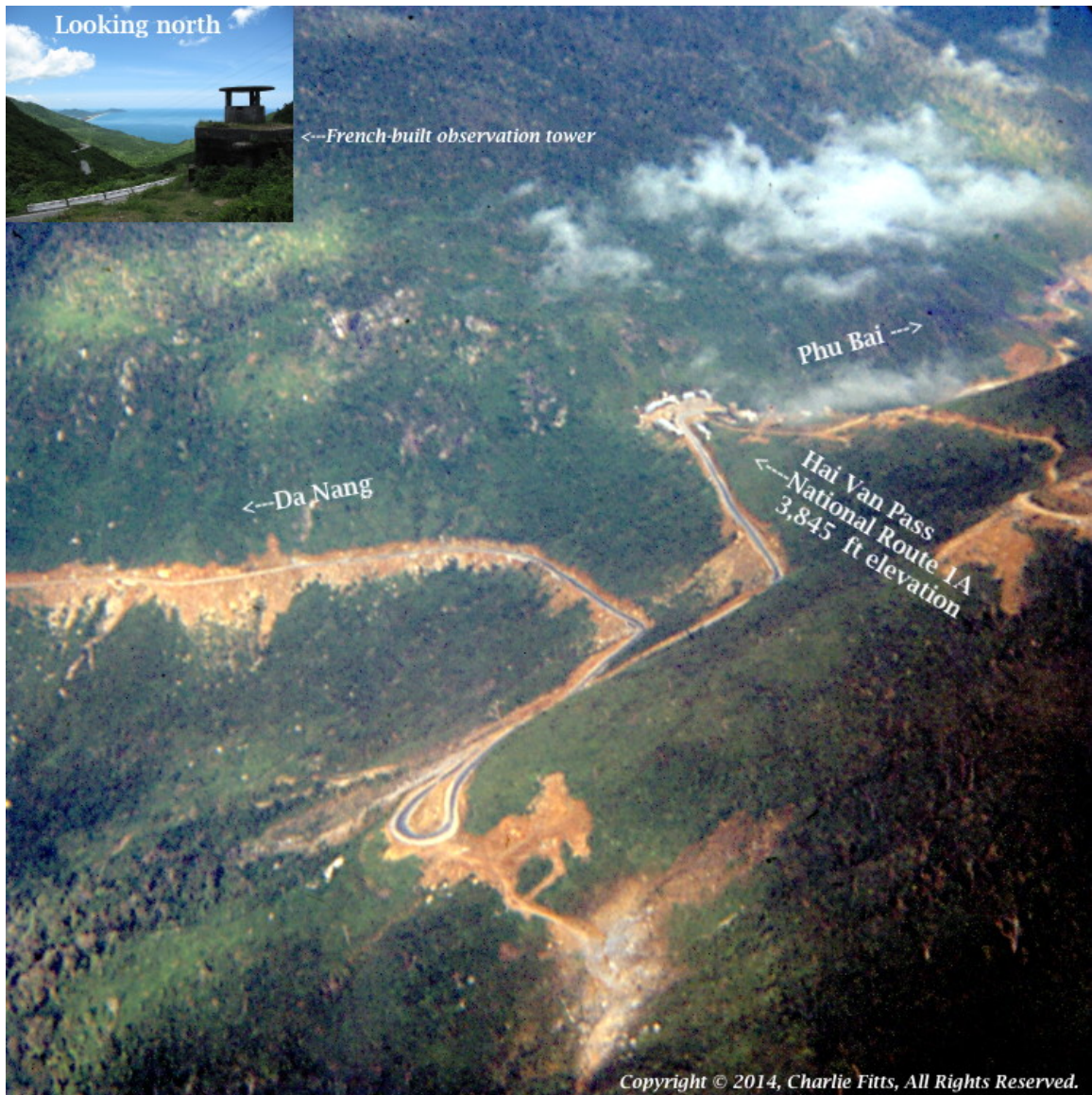
220th Aviation Company
"Catkillers" entrance sign, 1967

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220th Aviation Company entrance,
photo by CPT Tony Keltner,
Catkiller 17/35, 1967 —68

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On climb out westbound from Phu Bai
SP5 Charlie Fitts in back seat, 1967



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Phu Bai Airfield Looking Back



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House boats and fishermen

River Life



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Just crusing along I-Corps

VN River Patrol

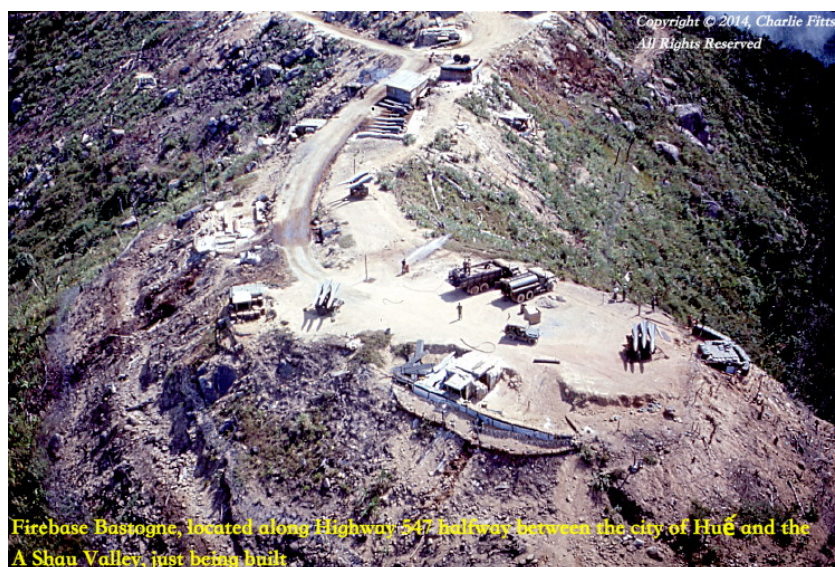


Leaving Hue Citadel

Narrow gauge Vietnamese railroad. A rare sight, indeed.



Train From Da Nang Headed Toward Phu Bai



Fire Base Bastogne – Awesome Rockets

On one of those test flights, Capt. Kovach and I headed north and we were up north of Hue somewhere. He says "I wonder how high a birddog can go." So up we went. I don't know how high we got but we could see well into North Vietnam around the curve in the coastline. We turned and headed back south and I looked back and saw an F-4 Phantom coming up behind and a little below us. I guess he decided we weren't worth wasting a missile on and he came up to our altitude and passed by about seventy-five yards to our right. I could see the two men in the cockpit looking at us looking at them.

Partially obscured Khe Sanh Combat Base

1969



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Abandoned Khe Sanh Combat Base

I haven't flown in a Birddog since I left Vietnam. I remember my last flight there because I had talked my way onto a real "mission." I'd logged about 48 hours riding in back seats up to this point and I wanted to return to the states with an even 50. This was a familiarization flight for a new pilot in the company and it was a two plane mission solely for the purpose of showing the new pilot the local landmarks. I have a photo of Khe Sanh as we flew over just south of it heading west into Laos. We flew a couple of miles into Laos then turned back. Those were interesting times. I realized while going over some of these old photos that they don't match up with my memories. So if anyone sees a photo and remembers things differently, I won't be offended to be corrected.

Anyway, after I got out, I got my BS in Natural Resource Conservation, got a private pilot's license and basic ground instructor's license, got some flight time in a Citabria and even got a few hours in a Decathlon, and made a career out of assembler language programming on IBM mainframes for a large Hartford insurer. I also did some technical writing. I've also done some computer consulting but I've finally eased into retirement. I saw a news article recently that talked about the Navy calling up retired veterans to work some old ship systems because nobody currently knew how to work them. But I haven't heard of the Army calling up any old birddog mechanics.

Bird dog going away
Phu Bai, 220th Aviation Company
"Catkillers"



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Last flight, Phu Bai



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Final Flight, June 1969

Surprise passenger caught on Phu Bai ramp



And one extra



THE END