

The story behind 1st OV-1 unit to deploy

By John Towler

The 4th ASTA was a name given to this military unit by the CIA. Originally it was the 82nd Aerial Surveillance and Target Acquisition (ASTA) Detachment. It was changed for security reasons.

The CIA also had their own name for the project. It was called project Yankee-Yankee-Uniform, or just YYU.

A little history. The United States never signed the Geneva Accords ending the French Occupation of North Viet Nam. One of the paragraphs of the Accords or agreements stated "No foreign country shall conduct electronic warfare in either South or North Viet Nam."

The Air Force and Navy was conducting electronic surveillance from other bases and from aircraft carriers.

In order for the United States Army to get the OV-1 C&B Models, or IR and SLAR, into South Viet Nam, the entire operation had a top-secret clearance. The entire operation — from the unit forming at Ft. Bragg, NC and including the deployment to Vung Tau South Viet Nam — was all funded by the CIA.

All the officers, pilots and enlisted men all had special ID cards to allow them access to a special section of Simmons Airfield at Ft. Bragg. All the airplanes and equipment was protect by a temporary 10-foot barbed wire fence, controlled by armed guards.

Only the Commanding General of the 82nd Airborne Division and his assistant knew our mission.

From the time we all reported until we departed, to the best of our knowledge, no other people in the armed services knew what we were doing.

All the officers had a special credit card issued by the CIA. We could buy almost anything we wanted ... hammers, screwdrivers, other special tools, rifles, pistols, personal survival gear, typewriters, Jeeps, trucks, almost anything you could think off.

When our training was completed, Army Intelligence in Washington made the decision it was time for us to go.

On Friday at 12 noon our commanding officer called us all together and made the following statement: Men you all have 15 days to visit your families for one last time. Tell them you will return in one year, tell them it is classified as to where you are going.

He then instructed the First Sgt to separate the men and give them further orders. All the pilots were told to fly the five OV-1's, 3 OV-1C's and 2 OV-1 B Models to Alameda Naval Air Station, in San Francisco Bay. Once the Mohawks were delivered, then each pilot was to report to the nearest military station to their home of record. Each pilot had 20 days to get his family moved and report to the G-1 of the nearest military base for further orders.

The CIA had a team of several hundred civilians and military personnel arrive at our location the same day at 4



This is John Towler, smiling after landing safely from our 4-hour flight across the South China Sea.

pm. Most of them were vehicle drivers, the others were laborers. These people moved everything, IR and SLAR ground stations, support vehicles, aircraft maintenance equipment, conex containers, typewriters, paper pencils, desks, uniforms, rifles, etc. to the Ft Bragg rail yard; all equipment and supplies were loaded on to covered box cars and shipped out to Mobile, AL.



When the other people on the base returned to duty on Monday morning, the hanger was empty, the barbed wire fence was gone, all the security guards gone. Not a trace of the 4th ASTA was anywhere on the airfield or at Ft. Bragg.

One of the generals on the staff at the 82nd made the following statement: "I am impressed, they just vanished."

All of the enlisted men, 15 days later, reported to Seymour Johnson AFB, NC. They all flew to Saigon, Viet Nam. It took several days. The equipment took 30 days by sea to arrive. The OV-1's were at sea 25 days and arrived at Subic Bay, Philippines.

Three OV-1 pilots — myself, Gary Trippensse, and Bill Buntyn — stayed at Cubi Point NAS for three weeks, test flying the five OV-1's.

Then on Dec. 23, 1964, along with two other pilots from the 23rd SWAD, we flew the Mohawks from Cubi Point NAS, Philippines to Vung Tau, South Viet Nam.

In the meantime all the men and equipment were already at Vung Tau. We were operational and ready to fly combat missions the day we arrived.

The 4th ASTA was the first OV-1 Mohawk unit to deploy, as a unit, from the United States to a combat zone. Other units followed, but none can ever say they were first.