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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Sept. 9 — Pleased with the effectiveness of chemical-defoliation and crop-destruction missions, the United States military is taking steps to triple the capability of those efforts.

This year Operation Ranch Hand, using an average of six C-123 spray planes, has squirted 1,324,430 gallons of nontoxic herbicide over 530,872 acres of jungle hideouts, trails and cropland in enemy-dominated areas of South Vietnam.

Plans call for Ranch Hand to build up to 18 such aircraft over the next several months, operating as the newly designated 12th Air Commando Squadron (Defoliation).

Military officials here refuse to discuss defoliation activities outside Vietnam, but it is known that some missions have been flown along the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos, the principal infiltration route for combat supplies and manpower streaming south from North Vietnam. Presumably the additional spray-plane capability will result in a broadened effort there, too.

The defoliation program, beginning as an experiment late in 1961, has been beset by controversy.

Critics assert that crop destruction is a nondiscriminatory weapon that probably causes suffering among innocent peasants along with enemy troops. They fear, further, that once chemicals such as herbicide and tear gas are commonly used, it might not be a long step before more noxious chemical warfare agents are considered usable.

Last week the Hanoi radio charged that 20,000 people had been killed in the Mekong River delta area of South Vietnam by United States planes spreading poisonous sprays.

Officials associated with the program say that the defoliating chemicals are the same kind as weed killers long used in the United States to destroy unwanted growth on lawns and

farms and along railroad and power line rights-of-way.

The principal agent is a 50-50 combination of 2, 4-D (dichlorophenoxyacetic acid) and 2, 4, 5-T (trichlorophenoxyacetic acid). It comes in an oil base and a water base. The other chemical used, primarily against high elephant grass and rice plants, is cacodylic acid. Neither defoliant is harmful to human life, officials insist, nor do the chemicals foul the earth to prevent new growth.

Officials say that elaborate pains are taken to prevent defoliants from falling on areas inhabited by friendly civilians. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge must approve each crop destruction mission following successive approvals by several levels of South Vietnamese and American officials. Nevertheless, the officials concede that occasionally some spray may drift from a target area, causing damage to rice crops or rubber trees.

When claims are made, prompt action is taken to pay damages. The current price for a mature rubber tree is \$87.

Each plane carries a 1,000-gallon tank of herbicide, enough to cover about 300 acres. The chemical is released through high-pressure nozzles beneath the wings and under the up-swept tail section.

The planes fly low and slowly. They make easy targets for Vietcong gunners, who so far this year have found their mark 533 times.

Only one of the lumbering aircraft has been brought down however, and though several crewmen have been wounded, none have been killed.

Enemy gunners doubtless would be more effective were it not for Air Force jet fighters that accompany the spray planes to keep down fire as much as possible.

Most of the enemy fire is from rifles and machine guns. Sometimes rifle grenades have

been fired at the planes and, in at least two instances, guerrillas have placed dynamite and rocks in holes and exploded them skyward when the planes droned overhead.

Two to five days after spraying, leaves in a swath roughly 80 yards wide and 10 miles long begin to turn brown and wither. If enough spray has fallen, many trees die after five or six weeks. Others resist the chemicals. Aerial observation is improved as much as 80 percent, officials say.

But with a new growing season, lush new foliage springs up, requiring repetition of the whole procedure.