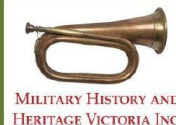



PHILLIP ISLAND, VICTORIA
2013

CHOPPERS

Helicopters and the War in Vietnam

- Conference Day – 20 April
- Museum Dinner – 20 April
- Activity Day – 21 April

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CHOPPERS: HELICOPTERS AND THE VIETNAM WAR



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Command and Control of Helicopter Operations

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No 9 Squadron – Vietnam 1971
&
Commanding Officer 1979 -1981



While the conduct of Australian defence force helicopter operations in Vietnam, primarily those of no 9 Squadron RAAF, has been discussed in many forums, especially the lessons learned and unwarranted criticism of the RAAF support, the manner of how the task force conducted those operations seldom gets a lot of serious discussion, though its effects seemingly gets exaggerated in some quarters.

The thrust of this paper relies heavily on personal experience as well as anecdotes that have been discussed with some of the key players, both at the time and subsequently. Information gleaned from published histories and personal accounts such as Chris Coulthard-Clark's *The RAAF in Vietnam* and Bob Grandin's *The Battle of Long Tan as told by the Commanders*, is also used in support.

It is possible that some of the senior officers – all now retired or passed on – who were key players in the conduct of our operations may take some umbrage at what I say. Though I will contend that they cannot, of itself, argue that it is incorrect. The intent though is not to cast

aspersions on their performance, rather to discuss what occurred, some of the reasons why and how it could have adversely affected the RAAF's, and no 9 Squadron in particular, ability to conduct operations effectively, more than it is claimed that it did!

By way of recap, it is well to recall that helicopter support operations, or air mobile operations as the US army termed it, was really a totally new concept for Australian forces. The Australian army hierarchy and planners had realised from observing US army tactical development, that air mobile operations had significant potential to enhance their ability to prosecute elements of the land battle, especially jungle warfare. This potential was confirmed as the US army increased its land force commitment, supported by huge numbers of helicopters, to the Vietnam war and demonstrated a new era in battle field mobility.

However, the army had no access to a helicopter force they could utilise to develop such a capability. By the early 1960s the RAAF had acquired a small fleet of Bravo model Iroquois - capable of carrying five troops (two sitting on the floor). But these were primarily operated in the search and rescue role – for which they had been specifically purchased by the RAAF. The navy had somewhat larger Wessex helicopters but they were primarily operating in the anti-submarine role – again having been purchased specifically for that purpose. Additionally, they were generally afloat with the fleet and thus not generally available for use by the army!

Thus, until 1RAR was deployed to Vietnam in April 1965, the use of helicopters by Australian army combat units for other than visual reconnaissance (Sioux piston-engine helicopters of no 16 ALA) was almost non-existent. Sure there had been occasions where US army, RAF and RAAF helicopters had been used, in Korea and Malaya, but they were, in the main, generally single aircraft missions either recovering injured personnel or delivering needed supplies; dustoff or "hash and trash" as such sorties became known in Vietnam. Gunship support was just a dream!!!

By the mid-60s the RAAF was the recipient of more Iroquois (the purchase assisted by army funds) - bringing the total fleet to 24 aircraft. But to army's chagrin, these additional aircraft were not dedicated to army operations; though army unit access to the fleet did increase. However, the overall effectiveness of this increased level of mobility and support was not assisted by a command and control system that was slow and unwieldy.

The effective use of helicopters in the land battle required the RAAF and the army to focus on and formulate protocol and procedures for joint operations at a different level to that then in use for strike operations and close air support. Thus a major element that required resolution was the question of command and control.

Why? Well in the main, RAAF strike operations in support of the army at that time didn't involve any real command and control problems. But there again, it could also hardly be described as joint operations! Essentially, the army asked that a particular target be engaged - generally requested by a forward air controller (usually an RAAF fighter pilot either airborne or on the ground), the aircraft was dispatched (if available), the FAC directed it

Onto the target, it expended its ordnance and then went home! Quite simple. I can recall as a young fighter pilot, flying the beautiful Avon Sabre (or Sword as it was generally known in the RAAF) that we never had face-to-face briefings with our army colleagues. We were simply given a task briefing that essentially stated what we had to do, where and at what

time. We had absolutely no idea of what the land commander was attempting to achieve or what part striking this target played in achieving his overall objective. To be honest, we simply didn't give it much thought; to us it was just another strike mission and nowhere near as demanding as air combat against other fighters or larger aircraft.

For its part, the RAAF as a whole initially paid little attention to providing helicopter support to the army; since it didn't fit the "projection of air power" that was the RAAF's focus. Indeed, helicopter units were seemingly almost ignored by the RAAF hierarchy and little joint service training was provided to the helicopter crews. It was essentially left to a succession of helicopter squadron commanders to develop some procedures and tactics.

For example, when I transferred to helicopter operations from fighters in January 1971, the sum total of joint operational training I had before deploying to Vietnam in May of that year was to attend a company commander's course, known then within the RAAF as "the junior woodchuck's session", conducted at RAAF base Williamtown by a small multi-service unit. At no stage during that course can I recall being told that there was the need for army and RAAF commanders to ensure that the RAAF support forces knew what was required of the mission - especially the land commander's priorities!!! Indeed, the idea that RAAF pilots should attend, where possible, an "orders group" or be briefed by someone who had actually attended the brief was not even mentioned! Yet, as I later found, the army itself would never contemplate fighting without such a briefing. For them an "O group" was an essential element of their battle planning and execution at almost every level.

So essentially, with few exceptions, RAAF helicopter crews initially approached their army tasks in a manner similar to the strike force; they flew in, did the mission and flew home with, at least in many instances, little apparent interest in the result. For its part, the army seldom provided guidance or orders as to what they expected/required for the mission. Any results were those provided by the FAC, if one was used.

Before discussing the command and control aspect further - especially as it became a major causal factor in the angst then and still evident now among some retired senior army/RAAF echelons - I feel it is appropriate to refresh ourselves with what is command and control, or C2 in modern parlance.

Operational command

The authority granted to a commander to:

- *Specify missions or tasks to subordinate commanders,*
- *Deploy units,*
- *Re-assign forces, and*
- *To retain or delegate operational control*

It does not of itself include responsibility for administration or logistics

Operational control

The authority delegated to a commander to:

- *Direct forces assigned so that the commander may accomplish missions or tasks which are usually limited by function, time or location,*

- *Deploy units concerned and retain or delegate tactical control of those units. It does not of itself include responsibility for administration or logistics*

These are the two definitions currently accepted by the ADF. They differ a little from that of yesteryear but for the purposes of this discussion we can and should accept them.

By way of contrast this is how the terms are addressed at the Charles Sturt University:

Command is the function of "ordering" and is based on a hierarchical system within and organisation and operates vertically

Control is the function of "directing" and deals with the situation and is exerted across organisations

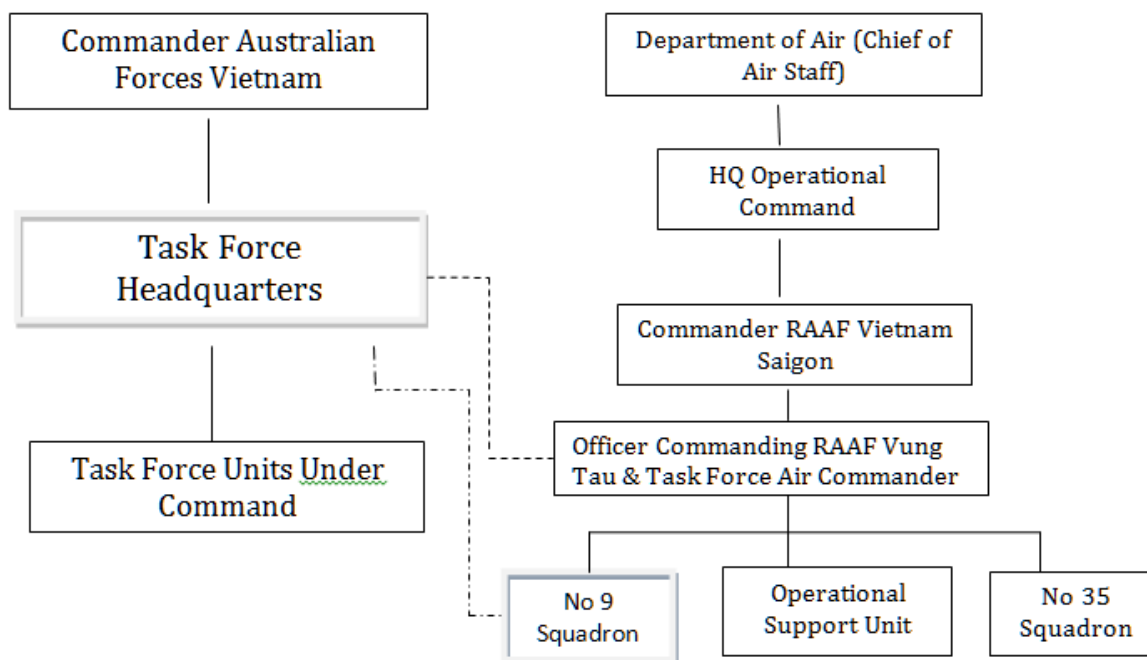
Coordination is a function of both command and control and concerns the systematic and effective utilisation of resources.

Returning now to Vietnam, Chris Coulthard-Clark mentions in his official history, *The RAAF in Vietnam*, that the decision to commit eight Iroquois to Vietnam in support of the new task force was made without consultation with the RAAF. Given that a previous request from the then chief of the general staff for two RAAF helicopters to be sent to Vietnam to either support 1RAR when it first deployed to Vietnam or to gain "hands on" experience in Vietnam with the US army, had been rebuffed by the then chief of air staff (we already have jungle experience from our operations in Malaya being the basis of the response!) This decision took the RAAF somewhat by surprise. More importantly, it caused some serious difficulties due to the lack of contingency planning. Consequently, the Iroquois arrived in Vietnam without, door guns, body armour etc. – a fact that was to initially hinder their attempts to support army in the field and another causal factor for the increase in inter-service rivalries and friction that occurred between the task force and the RAAF.

To this scenario was added confusion as to the command and control to be exercised.

Along with the surprise of the commitment of the eight Iroquois, the CAS was even more surprised when the CGS stated that the Iroquois would be under army command. No they won't was the RAAF response!!! And that was the way it was.

Since 9 Squadron was not formally part of the task force, but rather in support, operational command of the unit was retained by the RAAF. In turn this was delegated to the senior RAAF officer in Vietnam (later to be the commander RAAF forces Vietnam and deputy commander Australian forces Vietnam) and exercised by the senior RAAF officer Vung Tau. The actual command of the squadron was exercised at that time by the then squadron CO, Wing Commander Ray Scott – the only senior RAAF officer in Vietnam (and essentially within the entire RAAF) with reasonable helicopter experience.



The initial senior RAAF officer Vung Tau (Group Captain Peter Raw) also held the appointment of "task force air commander" - notionally an appointment on the staff of the task force commander (at that time Brigadier Jackson). To this melting pot was added a touch of additional oversight from the policy officers at department of air who in their wisdom issued a directive "that the use of 9 squadron's aircraft in airlift operation was to be limited to staging areas that were relatively secure and free from expected enemy resistance" by the staff officers at headquarters operational command – which notionally had all operational units on its order of battle!!

I think you will agree that to restrict helicopter operations to only known safe areas was a relatively naive notion of what constituted war and no doubt added to army's low opinion of the RAAF.

Added to this was the army conception of just what eight Iroquois could do. A eight got you six on-line at best. If one was dedicated to dustoff, that left five for general support. At five soldiers per aircraft that meant a full lift was a platoon minus!!

Those officers who had served with 1RAR when it was part of a US army force had been delighted at the ease they could obtain helicopter support. A company lift – sure, when do you want it and where to? 16 - 20 "D" model (seats seven troops unlike the smaller Bravo model's five) or a flight of Chinook helicopters (24 troops) accompanied by helicopter gunships would duly arrive and conduct the mission. However, on occasions they had to wait because another unit had a higher priority. Interestingly, this delay or non-availability was often 'forgotten' when criticising the lack of RAAF response. For some army officers this would only change "when we own them".

Another aspect of US army operations that was often overlooked was the assignment of aircraft to a particular division or theatre often meant that while one area was flat out the

other had its choppers primarily on the ground. Can we borrow them? Not likely was the usual reply. Bang went several principles of war - concentration of force and economy of effort!

Back to Phuoc Tuy. Tasking of the Iroquois followed the system used in Australia. The user unit would "bid" for support and the task force staff would allocate requests in order of priority. These tasks would be sent, usually by radio, from the RAAF echelon at Nui Dat to the squadron - which was based at Vung Tau (another thorn in the side of better relations). Depending on the availability of aircraft, army would then be informed what tasks would be conducted and when.

For 9 Squadron, tasking also involved oversight by the task force air commander (TFAC). He was not about to have his watch spoiled by gung ho pilots undertaking missions outside the department of air directive. This involvement reached a climax during the battle of Long Tan when the TFAC initially refused the request for helicopter support given both the atrocious weather and the fact that it was a "hot" situation. This somewhat hostile and explosive situation was defused by the two 9 Squadron helicopter crews at Nui Dat - they had flown Col Joye and Little Pattie to that base for a concert - deciding they would fly the mission anyway - which they did successfully.

But even in the post-fight "clean-up", command and control again entered the equation. The RAAF dustoff aircraft were not permitted to use landing lights since they illuminated the aircraft (and where they were going) and thus made enemy engagement easier. Thus they had to approach "lights off" which made for a slower process compared to the US army dustoffs who arrived lights blazing! Another complaint and more angst!

Thankfully, the implementation of sensible use of operational control eventually occurred along with an increase of aircraft strength to 16 "H" models (then the biggest and best) and the relationship between the supported army units and 9 Squadron mellowed as well as becoming quite effective (especially as a company lift with gunship support was finally a reality).

This, in my opinion, was probably assisted by successive TFAC's generally avoiding being involved in day-to-day tasking leaving this to his representative - a senior pilot, who could actually provide reasonable advice on what was feasible, drawn from 9 Squadron and on-site at Nui Dat (sometimes I might add as a form of punishment by an annoyed C.O.). At times, the mission lead was even afforded the opportunity to attend the actual land commander's "orders group" to hear firsthand what was the objective and how that commander expected the operation to unfold.

Nevertheless there were still instances where the helo mission commander wasn't fully aware of just what the land commander wanted/needed - a somewhat dangerous way to use air support since if the airborne commander decides to abort the insert this could have serious consequences for the ground elements if he is not fully in the picture.

On the other hand, there was always the odd day where the use of airborne assault could give rise to humorous situations. I remember well a major lift when the battalion Sunray (C.O.) - who was airborne in an army Possum Sioux called up Albatross One and asked for a "silent insert". Since we were a total of 14 Hueys - 12 "slicks" (troop carriers) and a light fire team

– we could hardly be "silent". However, we understood what he meant – no pad preparation by the gunships as the slicks were landing and departing.

Yet in contrast to difficulties that seemed to arise during operations with the main elements of the task force, operations with the SAS seldom had any such problems. Indeed, the relationship between the squadron and SAS remained strong well after the end of operations in Vietnam. Why? Well for mine it was that we all knew what we had to do for each mission with SAS. If it was an insert, the team to be inserted came down from the hill (you could smell them before you saw them!!) And we briefed the insert together. If it was an extract, then the SAS commander in charge of that call sign came down to the briefing and ensured we all knew what was going to occur, including plans B and C. One of the other reasons was probably that SAS and the squadron had essentially learned together and our tactics and procedures were as a result of that mutual cooperation and training; they understood our operational limitations and we understood theirs.

There was also another aspect of command and control that the army seemingly did not understand and which for them was, at times, confusing.

With the RAAF, the aircraft captain, irrespective of rank, is the sole arbitrator of what occurs in his aircraft. If he decides the task is too risky or he wants to conduct it "this way" then that decision is final and no senior officer can overrule him – especially if the aircraft is airborne – other than to cancel the mission. The only recourse the senior officer has is to replace the pilot. But operational control doesn't afford that opportunity to the user; operational control simply allows him to nominate the task parameters - time, place etc. - not how it is to be done. While a similar protocol applied to army aviation, there were and have been much anecdotal evidence where a senior passenger has directed the pilot to something against the pilot's initial decision. Indeed one of my last missions as a gunship leader was to assist in the recovery of a Kiowa shot down after the passenger, a major who had just arrived in country and was visiting back beach (being on the Saigon staff) demanded a closer look at bunker system in Long Tan which the Possum pilot had taken him to. Unfortunately, and to the surprise of them both, the bunker was manned and relatively accurate fire power was brought to bear on the hapless Kiowa!

What of the lessons learned?

Well following our withdrawal from Vietnam, from my perspective, the RAAF as whole seemingly didn't learn anything from Vietnam so far as battlefield helicopters were concerned. Despite the best efforts of a number of experienced RAAF helicopter commanders, several of whom had worked hard at developing battlefield helicopter doctrine, joint operations seemingly reverted to pre-Vietnam days, although the now four helicopter squadrons did get an army "ground liaison officer" appointed to either the squadron or the base commander's staff and a RAAF officer appointed to be the division liaison officer. The fact that support helicopter crews still lived at the nearest hotel/motel didn't engender good relations – just as being at back beach/Vung Tau rather than Nui Dat soured to some degree the working relationships among senior army officers (not so for the junior officers and troops who would "hitch a ride" back to Vung Tau for an overnight "rub and scrub" in town as well as cold beer and good food at the RAAF compound!). Tasking was subject to delays as unit requests found their way first through the army system and then the RAAF system until finally arriving at the squadron.

When I assumed command of 9 Squadron in January 1979, one of my first meetings with army was to discuss complaints about apparent poor RAAF support, leveled by the commander of 6 Brigade. After listening to the complaints – which in the main focused on both availability of support and the degree of support effectiveness, it seemed to me that command and control was still a problem. In response to my claims that army would not fight without "O groups" at appropriate levels, the brigade commander accepted the challenge to invite us to "O" groups and then see if things improved. It did, to the extent that when we finally took the squadron tactical – we moved forward of the rear base and lived (perhaps more comfortably than our fellow army colleagues) under canvas. Did we do it well? Probably not but we tried! Did joint support and mission effectiveness improve? It sure did mainly because we now communicated!

Finally, the question of command and control of battlefield helos ultimately saw the transfer of that element to the army. Our superiors were warned during my time as squadron C.O. that there were concerted moves to achieve that transfer by army officers who had been in Vietnam in the early days of 1RAR and the task force, and who now held very senior appointments and had the wherewithal to push their barrow. The fact that the RAAF continued to ignore army and focus on the projection of the sharp end of air power eventually cost them the helo fleet. For some RAAF officers, the decision was one of relief while for others it was to be mourned; since they saw battlefield helicopters becoming just another "truck" or APC for infantry commanders. Later events have probably proved the latter to be closer to the correct situation.