

# CHOPPERS: HELICOPTERS AND THE VIETNAM WAR



MILITARY HISTORY AND  
HERITAGE VICTORIA INC.

THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE  
HELD AT THE NATIONAL VIETNAM VETERAN'S  
MUSEUM, PHILLIP ISLAND BY  
MILITARY HISTORY AND HERITAGE VICTORIA

20 APRIL 2013



Proudly supported by: BIG SKY PUBLISHING

# **A Bloody Job Well Done; the Royal Australian Navy And Helicopter Combat Assault Operations in the US Army, Vietnam, 1967 – 1971.**

**Commander Max Speedy, DSC, RANR**

## **The Big Picture American Context**

Following the end of World War II, an uneasy peace ensued with Russia and the United States undertaking an all out arms race with atomic weapons centre-stage for both sides. Although the Korean War (June 1950 - July 1953) was a massive ground campaign fought by troops in trenches and World War I style advances and retreats supported by artillery and air bombardment, in the background was the US being able and stating it would if necessary, use its atomic weapons.

While the Korean War was big in any sense, America was facing a bigger Russian enemy across the plains of Germany. To fight a war as was being postulated, the US Air Force had as its principal objective, the strategic delivery of massive numbers of atomic weapons on mainland Russia while the US Army (and NATO to a lesser extent) was required to hold vast numbers of Russian and East German tanks at bay by defence in depth and theatre nuclear weapons.

Such was the growth of US defence budgets from the mid-1950s that the missile programme had grown from US\$500M in 1954 to US\$3.7B in 1959 with conventional equipment (all personnel and their equipment and so on) receiving only US\$600M.<sup>1</sup>

At that time the focus of the Army was on the nuclear battlefield. Organic aviation was viewed by the Army as the best means of maintaining combat operations in an area characterised by great depth and frontage with the dispersion of many small self-contained units. The major threat was viewed as a sophisticated enemy attacking with masses of armour on the plains of Europe. Counter- guerrilla warfare at that time was viewed as a secondary mission. Nevertheless, the early planners in air mobility perceived that one of the automatic fallouts in organising the army for greater air mobility would be the much greater capabilities in the lower orders of warfare. While the French and British experiences in Algeria and Malaya were being studied, some warned that the counter-insurgency training being given was more like conventional tactics with helicopters.<sup>2</sup> Sun Tzu's dictum of having to know not only yourself but also your enemy was being overlooked.

The keystone to air mobility is the helicopter. There has been no conflict since Vietnam where the helicopter in one role or another has not played an important and very impressive part: Iraq I (1991) and II (2003) and Afghanistan (current) for the US and Timor for the Australians are good examples. In the late-1950s it had been easy to downplay the versatility and uniqueness of this vehicle. Many futile discussions (USAF vs. US Army) had been held on the cost, ton-mile capacity, complexity, and limitations of the helicopter when either

---

<sup>1</sup> Colonel David H Hackworth, & Julie Sherman, *About Face*, Pan Books, Sydney, 1989, fn p 315

<sup>2</sup> Hackworth, *ibid* p 431.

comparing it to fixed-wing transport or other means of mobility. The simple fact was that no other machine could have possibly accomplished the job of the helicopter. It alone had true vertical capability and could perform scores of missions ranging from an insertion of a long range patrol to the vertical assault of an entire division; it alone could place artillery on the mountain tops and resupply these isolated bases; it alone could evacuate the wounded out of a chimney landing zone, surrounded by 100 foot trees; it alone could move the infantry support weapons and deliver that discreet measure of fire so dear to the survival of a platoon. Only the helicopter could place a small bulldozer on a critical piece of terrain or extract another aircraft downed in the jungles and return it to fly again. Therefore, in discussing the inter-service differences between the US Army and Air Force, and they were many, the helicopter and specifically the tactical transport as represented by the Huey was the absolute *sine qua non* of the Army's concept of air mobility.<sup>3</sup>

In a futile attempt to reverse the course of events engulfing the French in Indochina, the US Air Force contributed 1 800 airlift sorties, comprising 13 000 flying hours, during the first six months of 1954. On 7 May 1954, Dien Bien Phu fell to the Communist Viet Minh, followed on 20 July by the Geneva Convention on the partition of Vietnam. The US decision to pledge increased aid to the government in South Vietnam was made by Presidential announcement of 24 October 1954. Thus began the role which the US was to play in counter-insurgency within the overall framework of US foreign policy and supplemented by the policies of the US Department of Defense.

The commitment, by the United States, to a policy of unlimited support of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), short of actual combat forces, was subject to many restraining influences. In addition to the provisions of the Geneva Accords of 1954, which the US, although not a signatory, had undertaken to support, there were other considerations - the possible alienation of the Vietnamese people; relations with Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand; and vulnerability to charges by the communist North Vietnamese and Communist China, of aggression in Southeast Asia. Further, and of particular significance to the US Army and Air Force, was the opinion of Mr. McNamara, Secretary of Defense, (December 1961) that the war in South Vietnam should be considered a ground war and that although 'naval and air support operations are desirable, they won't be too effective...' The US military structure in South Vietnam and the ensuing intra-command relationships reflected an awareness of McNamara's views.<sup>4</sup>

At the working level in South Vietnam both Army and Air Force officers hammered out practical methods of solving their day-to-day problems and coordinating their efforts. The US Air Force had opposed the Army's continued acquisition of the Caribou. By 1966 the Army was operating six Caribou companies in Vietnam. The 7<sup>th</sup> Air Force, which had been upgraded from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Air Division on 2 April 1966, was severely critical of the Army's method of operation of its Caribou assets. They believed that the Caribou should be incorporated in the Air Force managed Southeast Asia airlift and consequently be more productive from a ton-mile basis.

---

<sup>3</sup> John J Tolson *Vietnam Studies Airmobility 1961 – 1971* Department of the Army, Washington DC 1989, Ch VI, Airmobile Developments, 1966, The Genesis of the 1<sup>st</sup> Aviation Brigade.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.chancefac.net/ROE/evolution\\_of\\_the\\_rules\\_of\\_engage.htm](http://www.chancefac.net/ROE/evolution_of_the_rules_of_engage.htm)

The Army on its side had some very strong advocates for retaining the Caribou and procuring its turbine powered successor, the Buffalo, as soon as possible. They pointed to the history of the Caribou's responsiveness to the demands of far-flung isolated units and the lack of guarantee that such support would be available under Air Force management. They looked upon the Caribou as a bitterly contested battle for a legitimate Army mission and were appalled at the mere possibility that it might be traded for an empty guarantee that they could remain in the helicopter business. It was truly an emotionally charged atmosphere – one that was neither as black nor as white as the critics on both sides appeared to believe.

The Chiefs of the US Army and Air Force eventually signed an agreement on 6 April 1966 to be implemented by 1 January 1967 that in simple terms transferred the Caribou to the Air Force and Army retained its helicopters and all associated development. As an aside to this agreement the 135<sup>th</sup>, a Caribou company, became the 135<sup>th</sup> Aviation Company in April 1967 at Fort Hood, Texas and deployed to Vung Tau on 1 October 1967 with its UH-1 helicopters<sup>5</sup> and became the 135<sup>th</sup> Assault Helicopter Company (AHC), the Experimental Military Unit (EMU) of the US Army and the Royal Australian Navy Helicopter Flight Vietnam (RANHFV).

At this time the Army was under a critical shortage of pilots: it had a strength of 9 700 against a requirement for 14 300. The training pipeline was only authorized to provide 120 pilots per month although the planners had forecast the shortage for some time. In March 1966, approval was finally given to expand to training 410 per month, but even with these numbers strengths would only rise to 12 800 by mid 1968 against a need for nearly 21 500.<sup>6</sup>

The effects of these pressures on the finished product, young warrant officers fresh from an intense 32 week course with absolutely no army experience arriving one day and in combat the next is hard to imagine. Nevertheless, they adapted well. Like them, the Navy pilots were no more immured in war than they but the naval advantage was we had much more flying experience, much of it in command and with many night hours under full instrument flying conditions as well. But as for the new US Army warrant officer and the very few regular US Army officers, so we the relatively senior naval officer pilots all had to fly about 300 hours in the co-pilot's seat as *Peter Pilots* until it was judged we could become aircraft captains. In this environment, regardless of rank ruling as in other US Army situations, the aircraft captain, generally another WO with months of combat time would oversee our combat flying.

### **The Australian Context**

The ANZUS and SEATO alliances in the Australian southern and east-Asian sphere of interest followed the American lead in halting any advance of communism as best the respective defence budgets allowed.

The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) had two aircraft carriers. HMAS SYDNEY which had given sterling service in Korea had its Hawker Sea Furies and Fairey Fireflies. HMAS MELBOURNE commissioned in 1953 with its angled flight deck, steam catapult and Sea Venom all weather night fighters and Gannet anti-submarine fixed wing aircraft was to serve on the Australia Station in *Konfrontasi* against Indonesia, a communist client state in those days. Many RAN personnel served in the Malayan Emergency as did the Australian Army,

---

<sup>5</sup> Recollections of Colonel John Crossman, US Army, member of 135<sup>th</sup> Aviation Company soon to become the 135<sup>th</sup> Assault Helicopter Company.

<sup>6</sup> Tolson, *ibid*.

retaining its skills in jungle warfare contrary to the emphasis of US forces. The Australian armed forces emphasis was very much one of containing the communist risk from Indonesia and Malaya. Vietnam was not on our political horizon.

In what came as a surprise move, the Australian government had decided in 1959<sup>7</sup> to decommission the Fleet Air Arm (FAA). *The crux of the whole matter rested with the falsity of the assertion that the RAAF could maintain the security of our sea communications...I was aware that there were influential and vocal detractors of the FAA [Fleet Air Arm], but I had misjudged their influence.*<sup>8</sup> And as a consequence MELBOURNE was to go also. With long standing bitter rivalry between the RAAF and FAA, this only proved once more to Navy that the RAAF could not be trusted. Still, with the tide of communism rising fast, the decision was reversed in 1960 probably proving to the RAAF that Navy could not be trusted. The Navy invested heavily in anti-submarine warfare and purchased the Westland Wessex 31A in 1961-62 with its dipping sonar to counter the communist Indonesian submarine risk.

The RAN had a long-standing requirement to provide a carrier task group for the SEATO annual combined exercise and this meant MELBOURNE and the Carrier Air Group, consisting of the frontline squadrons 816 and 817<sup>9</sup> were fully committed. The training squadrons 723, 724 and 725, were all actively engaged in meeting the fleet's support requirements along with the scheduled air and maintenance training programs. To these tasks was added in December 1966, a request from the United States Government for pilots and aviation specialists to supplement its own forces in the Republic of South Vietnam.<sup>10</sup>

While Indonesia simmered away in Australian eyes, counter-insurgency in Vietnam had been growing apace and in July and August 1962, the Australian Army Training Team (AATTV) of 30 officers and warrant officers was sent to provide mainly jungle warfare skills' training to the Army of the Republic of (South) Vietnam (ARVN). By December 1964, the AATTV numbers had grown to 100. In August 1964, the RAAF had a flight of Caribou in Vung Tau bringing Australian numbers up to 200.

National Service was introduced in Australia in November 1964 despite strong opposition by the Army and the public generally and on 29 April 1965, the Prime Minister Robert Menzies announced that following a request from the South Vietnamese government and in close consultation with the US, Australia would send a battalion (1RAR) of troops to Vietnam.<sup>11</sup> On 27 May 1965, they departed for service with the US 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade. In April 1966, the Australian Task Force (ATF) was created allowing the Australians to operate and fight their own war in Phuoc Tuy province independent of the US forces.

---

<sup>7</sup> On 26 November 1959 the Minister for Defence, Mr Townley, in a ministerial statement announced that due to lack of funds the FAA would be disbanded in 1963.

<sup>8</sup>Sir Henry Burrell, *Mermaids Do Exist: The Autobiography of Vice Admiral Sir Henry Burrell*, MacMillan Press.

<sup>9</sup> 816 SQN had Gannets and Sea Venoms in its B Flight while 817 had its Wessex.

<sup>10</sup> Information Paper for Cabinet, *Request For Helicopter Pilots For Vietnam*, Copy 2, May 1967, signed Allen Fairhall Minister for Defence, National Archives Canberra.

<sup>11</sup> According to the *Pentagon Papers* published in the New York Times in 1971 as noted by Michael Caulfield, 'Vietnam Years', Hachette, Australia, p399, 2007, and by P.G. Edwards, 'A Nation at War: Australian Politics, Society and Diplomacy During the Vietnam War 1965-1975', Allen & Unwin, pp 299-300, 1977, it was a completely manufactured invitation by Prime Minister Menzies dressed up to appear as if it had come from the South Vietnamese Government. The Australian Government was more concerned with the attitudes and policies of the US Government than those of the South Vietnamese. Nothing has changed when one considers the weapons of mass destruction lies in 2003.

With the expansion of the ATF to include two and later three battalions (in 1967), an SAS regiment, tanks, armoured personnel carriers and supporting arms, the need soon arose for helicopter support. On 6 June 1966, eight Iroquois UH-1Bs of 9 Squadron RAAF landed at Vung Tau to support ATF at Nui Dat some miles to the north. In 1968, the numbers were increased to 16 aircraft and progressive upgrades made to UH-1H models.

### Enter the Fleet Air Arm

It is interesting to note that the RAN gave some consideration to commissioning an additional air squadron, 852 Naval Air Squadron with UH-1 helicopters to operate ashore in support of the ATF. It was considered this action would result in the RAN holding utility type helicopters well in excess of the required inventory at the conclusion of the conflict and so no further action was taken.<sup>12</sup>

While the RAN had commitments to Vietnam by way of SYDNEY as the *Vung Tau Ferry* giving invaluable logistic support to the Army and destroyers on the gun line providing shore bombardment, there was no Fleet Air Arm participation beyond a helicopter on SYDNEY. For reasons not connected with Vietnam, naval aircrew numbers had been on the rise to ensure mainly that MELBOURNE's anti-submarine effort could be maintained for the Wessex helicopters.

The RAAF began planning to increase the strength and capability of its existing helicopter squadrons and at the same time increase the number of helicopter pilots being trained. Initially a proposal was formulated to request the United States to provide an additional four helicopters, to be flown and maintained by Australians in support of the ATF. The US had rejected similar requests by Thailand and could not see a way clear to agree to the Australian option.<sup>13</sup> The RAAF had also identified an immediate need in 9 SQN for additional qualified helicopter pilots for active service operations during 1967-69. To meet this unexpected demand the RAN agreed it could loan to the RAAF eight Navy helicopter pilots for operations with 9 SQN until its own (RAAF) training pipeline had been expanded. These eight pilots served with 9 SQN from May 1968 – April 1969 with some of them serving for various lengths of time (for months) with the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC at Blackhorse and Bear Cat. One RANZF pilot, Flying Officer KJ Wells also attached to 9 SQN flew with the 135<sup>th</sup> and 'During that week I flew 33 hours which was about twice what I would have flown with 9 Squadron in the same period.'<sup>14</sup>

In this same Chief of Naval Staff brief (footnote 12, qv), quite a number of seemingly secondary considerations were raised to what appear now to be (and probably were then also) major inter-Service issues. Paragraph 10 noted that *...the proposed deployment to Vietnam should take place as soon as possible as the Fleet Air Arm needs a raison d'être to maintain morale.*

---

<sup>12</sup> Navy Office File 79/201/3, 6 June, 1967, signed by DNAP, Capt H.E. Bailey, DSC, RAN.

<sup>13</sup> CNS Brief by DNAP 9 May, 1967:

"1... COS Minute 40/1967 recommended that eight RAN pilots and supporting personnel be made available to fly helicopters provided by the US in South Vietnam, and envisages this force would be incorporated in N<sup>o</sup> 9 SQN, RAAF. The only costs expected would be those arising from daily pay and allowances.

3. ... AJSS Washington indicated that the US could not accept the above terms as they had already refused a similar Philippines request and did not want to give the impression that they were forming a White Man's Club in the operational area..."

<sup>14</sup> Chris Coulthard-Clark *The RAAF in Vietnam, Australian Air Involvement in the Vietnam War 1962 – 1975* Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, 1995, p 140.

Later (Para 15), a lengthy discussion was raised about possible RAAF objections to a Helicopter Flight Vietnam being with the US Army: they would not be an identifiable Australian force; would not be engaged in Australian operations; could not be administered; and, very importantly, the RAAF would not see it as a naval job. The brief fortunately noted the FAA's considerable involvement in *Konfrontasi*;<sup>15</sup> that they were versatile pilots; and that the RAAF flew with the USAF Liberators in World War II. Lastly,

*RAN aircrew feel that they are not wanted in the Vietnam theatre and consequently are suffering from an inferiority complex. It is imperative that a worthy role be given to the [FAA] if morale is to be preserved.*

The proper conclusion to the brief was that, amongst other things, the

*RAAF will raise objections that are not valid.*

The US Army logistic train was very long not only to Vietnam but to many hot spots around the world and this made providing additional helicopter crews and maintainers for another assault helicopter company for operations in South Vietnam difficult. This shortfall, the Australian Defence Department suggested, could be met in part by the RAN providing trained helicopter aircrew and maintainers to the US Army. This proposal was accepted by the US and Australian governments and is how the RAN Helicopter Flight Vietnam was born. The scheme of complement for the flight resembled that of a small naval air squadron and seems to be based on the four helicopters the US might have provided had the original RAAF request for assistance succeeded. It had pilots, observers, aircrewmen, maintenance sailors, a cook, steward, photographer, writer, and finally a sick-berth attendant and numbered 46 souls in all.

The first contingent deployed to South Vietnam in two stages during October 1967 under the Officer in Command (OIC) Lieutenant Commander Neil Ralph RAN who left with the first half and was followed a week or so later by Lieutenant Commander Pat Vickers with the remainder of the group to Vung Tau, the first of a number of homes for the US Army's 135<sup>th</sup> Assault Helicopter Company.

The length of a tour of duty to the flight was set at twelve months. There was no end date established for operations in Vietnam and no indication that the conflict was ever going to draw to a conclusion. So in May and June 1968 replacement personnel joined 723 SQN at NAS (Naval Air Station) Nowra for pre-deployment training. This contingent went as well to the Army's Battle Efficiency Course at the Jungle Training Centre, Canungra, Queensland, for three weeks of running, jumping, swimming, muddy misery. This group would become known as the second contingent and Lieutenant Commander Graham 'Zork' Rohrsheim was its OIC. The third contingent served under Lieutenant Commander David D. Farthing 1969-70 and the fourth and last contingent under Lieutenant Commander Winston 'Wingnut' P. James served until June 1971 when the Australian government ended its support for the South Vietnam conflict. In all, close to 200 Fleet Air Arm personnel served with great distinction in the RANHFV.

---

<sup>15</sup> Indonesia's confrontation over the territorial expansion of Malaysia with communist versus British colonial expansionist claims from each side. It was this more than the dominoes of Vietnam which provided the basis for Australia's need of the US as an ally.

A fifth contingent had been planned and its members nominated to replace the fourth group in October 1971. The group was of course stood down when Australia's withdrawal was announced in June 1971.



Most members of Second Contingent RANHFV 1968/69 at Bear Cat. OIC LCDR Graham 'Zork' Rohrsheim standing 3<sup>rd</sup> fm right. Others of this 45 strong group were on duties elsewhere on this day.

Each contingent OIC had a directive<sup>16</sup> by way of letter assigning him the powers of punishment equivalent to that of the CO of HMAS PENGUIN, the administrative base for navy personnel deployed overseas, and included inter alia:

#### Command

The overall command of all units and personnel of the AFV is vested in the Commander Australian Force Vietnam (COMAFV) and is responsive to, and under the operational control of COMUSMACV.

RANHFV will be placed under the operational control of the appropriate US Field Force Commander, initially the Commanding General II Field Force, Vietnam.

You are to conform with the Military Working Arrangement between the [US] Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee and the Commander United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam...

#### Logistic and Financial Arrangements

COMUSMACV will provide all logistical and administrative support [but] does not include those items unique to the RAN...

#### Responsibilities

---

<sup>16</sup> The copy quoted was signed by Admiral VAT Smith, Chief of Naval Staff, dated 24 September 1970 but all OICs had the same directive.

Should you be allocated a task, which, in your opinion, is contrary to the provisions of this Directive, endangers the national interests of Australia, *or is likely to imperil unduly your Flight* you are to report the situation to COMAFV, having first informed the Commanding Officer of the Aviation Company to which you are attached of your intention. You are to establish safeguards to ensure your aircraft and personnel do not violate the territory, waters or airspace of countries bordering on South Vietnam, nor to take part in operations near the Cambodian border. (Author's emphasis)

The US and Australian agreement for the RANHFV to work with the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC included a number of novel, if not unique, criteria. The Memorandum of Understanding between Commanding General, United States Army, Vietnam and Chief of Naval Staff (CNS), Royal Australian Navy, was signed on 9 November, 1967 by BRIG GEN Robert C. Taber, US Army and MAJGEN D. Vincent, Australian Force Vietnam, for CNS, RAN.<sup>17</sup> One unique aspect was that the Australian OIC was to be the Executive Officer of the 135<sup>th</sup> under the Major US Army CO; when the Major went on leave, the Aussie XO took command. The rest of the Australians were integrated rank for rank within the company's structure and became, in time, air mission commanders, platoon leaders, operations officers, gunship light fire team leaders, and maintenance team leaders with the authority each of those positions held in the US Army's structure. Working within an American culture far from our country and navy, in a very short time we became, to all intents and purposes, soldiers and apart from our beards and accents, frequently could not be identified as other than US Army.

The US Army mission description for an Assault Helicopter Company (AHC) was to provide tactical air movement of combat troops, supplies and equipment and air mobile operations.

Typical mission assignments were:

- a. Tactical airlift of troops
- b. Air movement of supplies and equipment
- c. Augmentation of Army medical Service aero medical evacuation units
- d. Search and rescue operations
- e. Provide Command and Control aircraft capacity to the supported unit.<sup>18</sup>

## US Rules of Engagement

Because of the nature of the growing American involvement starting with training assistance from 1962 and rapidly escalating to open warfare, there were aircraft operating within the Republic of Vietnam which had VNAF markings and Vietnamese crews: VNAF markings and US/Vietnamese crews; US markings and US/Vietnamese crews; and US markings with US crews.

Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) message 8678 of 16 February 1963 had authorized an amendment to the rules of engagement, pertaining specifically to US Army helicopters in the RVN, to

---

<sup>17</sup> The document was accessed from the Australian War Memorial, AWM 98 R579/1/27.

<sup>18</sup> Steve Eather, *Get the Bloody Job Done: The Royal Australian Navy Helicopter Flight – Vietnam and the 135<sup>th</sup> Assault Helicopter Company 1967-1971*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998, pp10-11

allow them to engage clearly identified Viet Cong forces considered a threat to the safety of the aircraft and their passengers. JCS stated that, during a visit of their team to the RVN, it was found that the JCS message of September 1962 concerning rules of engagement for armed Army helicopters had been erroneously interpreted to mean that the helicopter must wait to be fired upon before initiating return fire 'Such interpretation is more restrictive than was the intent...' and COMUSMACV was able to amend his rules of engagement accordingly.

With regard to the Cambodian airspace noted in the RANHFV OIC's directive, the US forces had quite specific rules imposed on them and as per our Navy Directive vesting operational control to the US, upon the RANHFV as well:

By day, normally no US aircraft will operate closer than three miles to the Cambodian border and then only when the ceiling is at least 1500 feet and visibility is three miles or better. When the border is clearly defined by physical landmarks, operational missions may be conducted to a point no closer than one mile to the border; non-operational flights are restricted to five miles from the border and at least 2000 feet altitude.

At night, no US aircraft will operate closer than three miles to the Cambodian border during periods of reduced visibility and only then when under positive radar control. Unless specifically authorized by this headquarters, no US aircraft will conduct combat missions more than two miles off the coast of Vietnam. Waivers to these border restrictions ... will be granted with the utmost discretion and then only when the border can be unmistakably defined by visual reference.<sup>19</sup>

But whilst the border areas were explicitly stated as no-go zones, the interdiction by all US forces and the CIA of the Ho Chi Minh Trail that ran the full length of North and South Vietnam went on day and night well inside the Cambodian and Laotian territories. There was a major difference between the overt statements and the covert operations.

In practice the OIC's Directive was impossible guidance (or was it a command?) to follow. Some of us would be flying as co-pilot with an American in command of the aircraft; just as often as Aussies were in command of an American aircraft with US crew but you were one aircraft in a group of 15. Even though I frequently flew as the leader of the ten *Slicks* or as the air mission commander there was no way we Aussies could abort a mission just because it was hot and we were 'imperilled'. With a US or South Vietnamese battalion commander in the back of the C&C (Command and Control) aircraft directing operations – in fact commanding that his troops be put into a specific place – no pilot had the authority to not follow those directions. There was frequent discussion and generally, relationships were excellent between the US or South Vietnamese back seat commanders and us as air mission commanders in the front responsible for our aircrews. It didn't stop the hot LZs we got into but we had a common cause.

You rarely knew if an LZ was going to get hot, mostly you were thrust into the thick of it. So, in the final analysis, all of us, Aussies and US alike, ignored the Chief of Navy directive and the US / RAN agreement.

---

<sup>19</sup> Extracted from [http://chancefac.tripod.com/ROE/MACV\\_62.htm](http://chancefac.tripod.com/ROE/MACV_62.htm)

The practice came down to this. Depending on the area we were operating in we would use suppressive fire without necessarily taking enemy fire first – the Nipa palm edges of most Delta LZs was a case in point, II Corps jungle clearings another. These places were pretty well always booby-trapped and the NVA (North Vietnamese Army) and VC (Viet Cong – *Charley*) could pop out of their spider holes in seconds. Suppressive fire kept their heads down at least for as long as the troops got out of the aircraft even if it did not last very long after that.

Some areas were literally free fire zones. Shoot first, ask questions later was Rule 1 and Rule 2 was to refer to Rule 1. If one helicopter reported taking fire, it was usual for all ten *Slicks* and the gunships to return it at least on the side it came from. The expenditure of 7.62mm M60 rounds was phenomenal – each *Slick's* M60 could use 500 rounds per insertion – no wonder we carried thousands of rounds per gun as the daily order of LZs was in the 15 – 20 range. The gunships used tens of thousands of rounds and dozens of 2.75” rockets every day. With fuel and munitions available at hundreds of places across the country, we refuelled and rearmed at wherever was closest on a take what you need, no questions, and no paper-work basis.

We regularly operated within the buffer zone of the Cambodian border (in the Seven Mountains area in the west or the *Parrot's Beak* north-west of Saigon) and on a few occasions in 1969, we crossed it, supposedly in hot pursuit. This was prohibited in the MACV directive but all US forces operated covertly well within Cambodia and Laos for years until the invasion of Cambodia took place in 1970 when covert finally became overt.

In May 1970 however, COMAFV directed the 3<sup>rd</sup> Contingent OIC that his personnel were not to be involved when the US were to openly invade Cambodia. The result was that the 135<sup>th</sup> had to be taken out of the operation because ‘all but one of the Command and Control pilots and all of the [Slick] Lead Pilots’<sup>20</sup> were Australian personnel. As a consequence, there were not enough qualified US crews to make up the 135<sup>th's</sup> fifteen mission aircraft much to the annoyance of Aussies and US alike and so the 135<sup>th</sup> was assigned to the Mekong Delta instead.

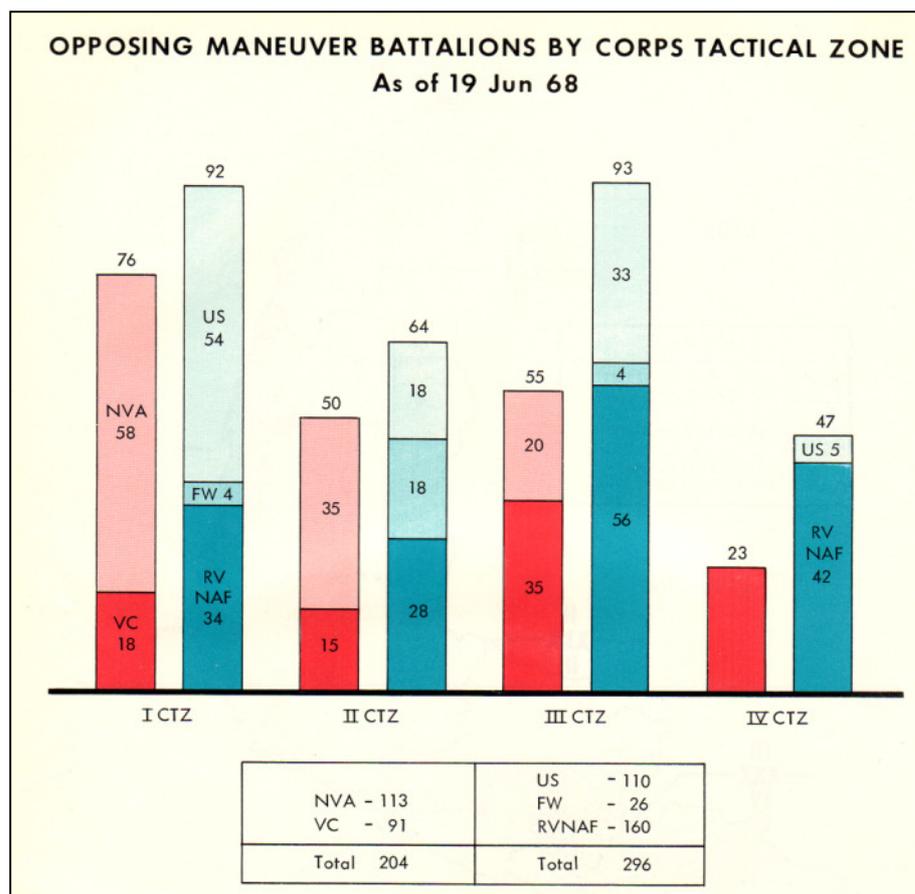
### **The Vietnam War in Context**

Whilst it may have begun as small skirmishes, by 1968 at the height of the Vietnam War, it was a major US undertaking involving 538 000 US and another 122 000 Free World Forces (Australia, Korea, Philippines, New Zealand, Thailand) – 660 000 against a very determined 600 000 North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong (VC) irregulars.<sup>21</sup> With soldiers roughly one for one and with weapons very frequently matched, a stalemate was inevitable unless greater technological superiority could turn the balance. In US terms, this was a massive air superiority led by the B52s and the bombing of Hanoi. Later conflicts such as the first Iraq War in 1991 saw the US Coalition of the Willing with 956 000 personnel successfully face off 260 000 Iraqis and is worth comparison.

---

<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey Gray, *Up Top, The Royal Australian Navy and Southeast Asian Conflicts 1955 – 1972*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, 1998, p 267

<sup>21</sup> Hackworth, *ibid*, pp570 – 76, discusses the huge numbers of support echelon personnel in Saigon, Long Binh, Nha Trang, stating that the US “tooth to tail” ratio could have been as poor as 1:10. The NVA / VC would have had their own tooth:tail ratio problems but most unlikely to have been as poor as this so they may well have had a numerical superiority of combat troops over the US led opposition.



**Figure 1: Opposing Maneuver battalions by Corps Tactical Zone, June 1968.** Source: CinC Pacific & Commander US MACV, *Report on the War in Vietnam*, ADF Library Service 959.70434 REP

The transition from 32 helicopters of doubtful capability in 1961/62 to the organisation of the massive 1<sup>st</sup> Aviation Brigade and its sisters, the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne, 101<sup>st</sup> Airmobile, and 1<sup>st</sup> Air Cavalry (Airmobile) Brigades didn't happen easily. A major study in 1962, laid the ground work for an army to be put in, supported and taken out of battle by helicopters. There were turf wars conducted between the US Army and US Air Force which insisted for a while that only it could provide any support for the troop carrying helicopters whilst they were airborne. Army's gunships could take over once the troops were out and on the ground. All these things were eventually resolved of course but it emphasises the very new and rapidly evolving nature of what was going on. The trade-off between Army and Air Force discussed above settled most issues.

By the end of 1964 there were 250 UH-1 in country. From early 1965 as the US involvement escalated, things moved very quickly. Most of the US Army's aviation effort was stood up in 1965 and the next three years to 1968/69, 1<sup>st</sup> Aviation Brigade grew to 4 500 officers and warrant officers and 19 500 men.

Each Combat Aviation Battalion was assigned in direct support to an Infantry Division, in our case the 222<sup>nd</sup> CAB to the US 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and also to the ARVN 9<sup>th</sup> in the Mekong Delta. That said, the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC flew in support of practically any and every army unit in II, III, and IV Corps and covered some very large distances to do so. 1<sup>st</sup> AVN Brigade aircraft flew about one million hours in 1969 with the 135<sup>th</sup> flying from 3 600 – 4 100 hours per month (35 000 hours in 1968/89), well in excess of the Pentagon assumptions of 1 500 hours per month per company and its concomitant logistics train.

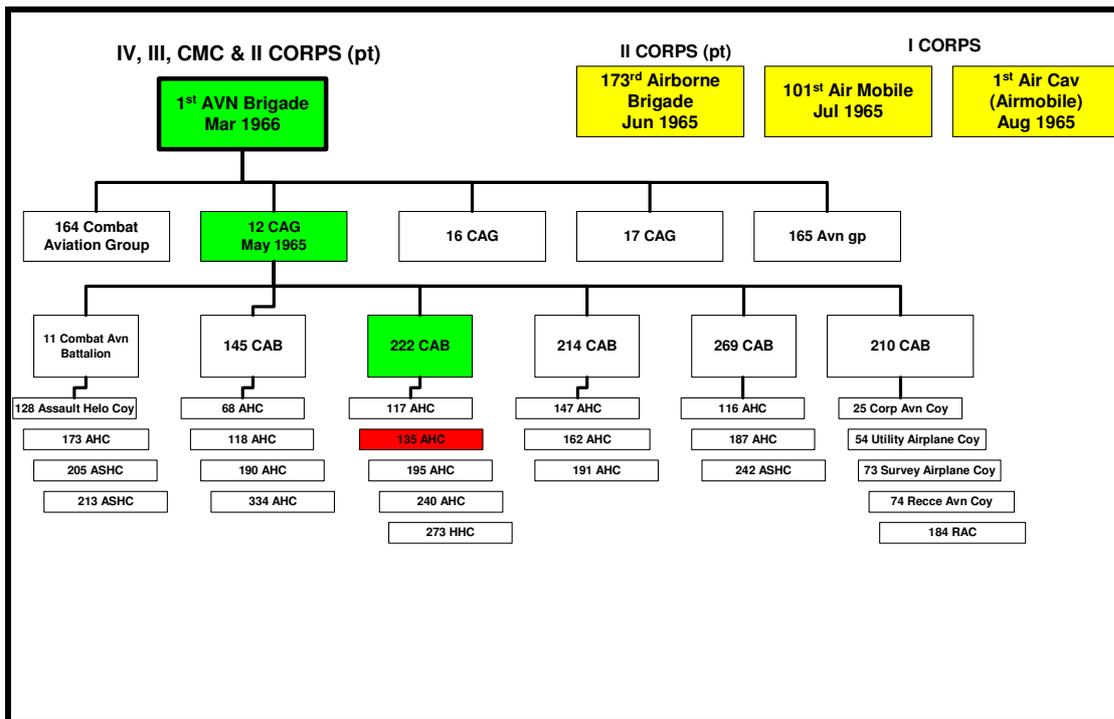
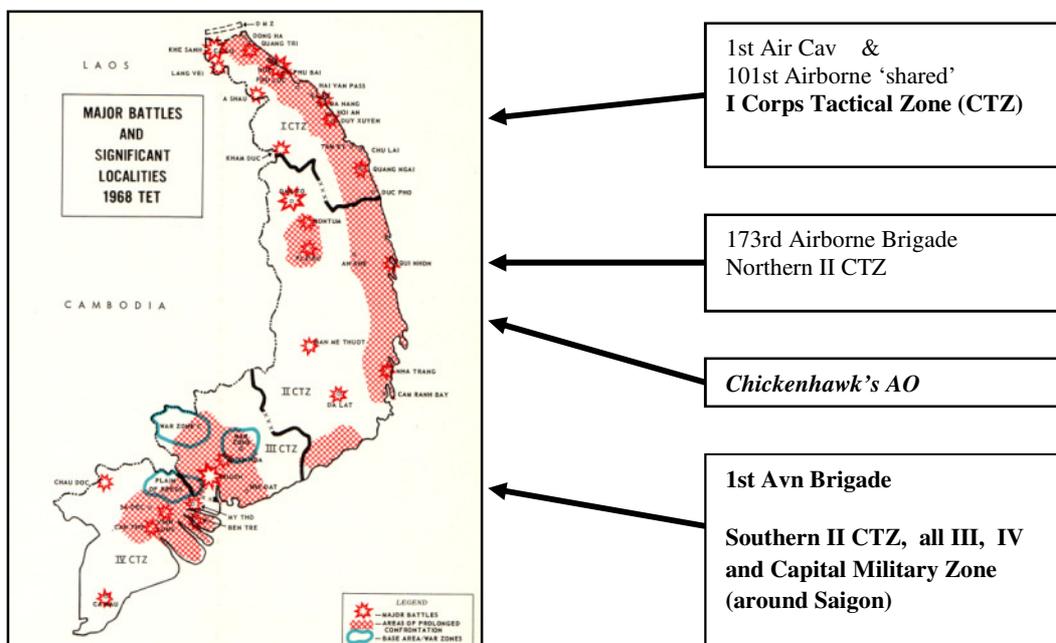


Figure 2: 1<sup>st</sup> Aviation Brigade Organisation 1968. The 135<sup>th</sup> AHC in red responded to the 222<sup>nd</sup> CAB.

With each assault helicopter company having 23 UH-1 D or H model *Slicks* and eight UH-1C Gunships, 1<sup>st</sup> AVN Brigade had in excess of 1 900 helicopters and with the other three brigades, the total was 3 400 in South Vietnam. The 1<sup>st</sup> Aviation Brigade was largest because its area of operations ran from the southern half of II CTZ (Corps Tactical Zone) through all of III and IV CTZ as well as the Saigon Capital City Military Zone. The other three brigades had the northern half of II and all I CTZ running up to the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel Demilitarised Zone with North Vietnam. On any day at least 1 000 helicopters could be airborne.



Map 1: South Vietnam Corps Zones and Tet I 'Hot Spots' in 1968

When the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC became operational in Vung Tau, for the few months of late 1967 and early 1968, it operated mostly with the ATF – SAS and infantry insertions in Phuoc Tuy Province. As 1967 wore on, the 135<sup>th</sup> was increasingly tasked to support ARVN and US troops to the north away from the Australians and sometimes so far north that the decision was eventually made to relocate the company from Vung Tau to Blackhorse base some distance north of Nui Dat. The move took place on 1 January 1968. The 135<sup>th</sup> became even more engaged in the Mekong Delta, in the far west to the Seven Mountains on the Cambodian border, and west and south into the sanctuaries of the NVA in the U Minh forest. The company moved successively to Bear Cat, east of Saigon, in December 1968 and then in September 1970 to Dong Tam in the heart of the Mekong Delta where the RANHFV remained until departing for home in June 1971.

During the four years of the RANHFV, 135<sup>th</sup> missions were conducted across the length and breadth of III and IV Corps Tactical Zones and into the jungles and mountains of II CTZ as well as the streets and lanes of Saigon city during the first Tet Offensive of February 1968. The 135<sup>th</sup> AHC was on standby in February 1969 to assist in the evacuation of the US Embassy in Saigon should it have been required.

Every day the standard mission for the 135<sup>th</sup> and all other assault companies was much the same. On the prior evening, 12 Group and or 222 Battalion would pass down the next day's operations to the company operations staff. It was their role to prepare the necessary maps marked up with the pick up point(s) or zones (PZ) and the first landing zone(s) (LZ). The detail was mainly only in the location as every task required ten *Slicks*, four gunships, and the command and control aircraft fitted out with its extra radios for the battalion staff in the back seat directing their troops on the ground. The *Slicks* would carry the troops and the gunships would provide the light fire support. If as happened frequently, the operation was across the country to the Cambodian border Seven Mountains area, a transit of some 200 miles from our Blackhorse or Bear Cat base, a spare aircraft had to be included. If lucky, it would have a quiet day waiting at some POL (Petrol, Oil, Lubricants) spot near the day's operations.

Each flying day began at 0430 with aircrew mustering at their allocated aircraft and doing pre-flight inspections. The aircraft crew chief was always present as was the gunner. The crew chief, a Specialist Class 4 of Leading Seaman equivalent rank, was assigned to an aircraft on which he performed the first line maintenance greasing rotor hubs, maintaining oil levels, cleaning engine filters and then flying everywhere the aircraft went manning one of its M60s. The gunner looked after the two M60 machine guns and provided the ammunition, about 3 000 rounds or whatever he could fit into the biggest boxes he could find. Aircraft would be started and if all was well shut down and breakfast and a briefing followed as well as picking up our box of C-rations for lunch that day.<sup>22</sup> If there were rectifiable faults, the maintainers had about an hour to fix that aircraft or provide another. Regardless of the circumstances, each AHC did generally provide its quota of 15 aircraft every day. All LZ insertions, American or ARVN, were of company sized elements of 100 men and ten *Slicks*, four gunships and the C&C aircraft was the unit the Army operated to do it. At one stage the 135<sup>th</sup> was down to 17 out of its establishment of 31 aircraft but the maintainers worked miracles (under appalling working conditions) and the 15 mission aircraft were always available. Such was the demand and the response; if the aircraft could be started, we flew it.

---

<sup>22</sup> Arriving back at base as late as we often did, the evening meal was long over so our lunch often had to last out for dinner also. We could never take a second box of Cs even though, practically anything else, ammunition for our aircraft for example, was on a take what you want basis.

By 0600 the C&C aircraft was usually off to pick up the battalion commander for the day with the gunships departing next. The UH-1Cs were slower by a margin of 20 knots because their gross all up weights exceeded their ability to fly at much beyond 70 knots until most of their ordinance or fuel had been expended. The *Slicks* departed next and being empty and thus faster caught up with the gunships and C&C at that first pick up zone always some distance away.

The crew of the Huey was two pilots (in case one was shot) and two crewmen. We pilots had a Smith & Wesson .38 Police Special revolver as our personal weapon while the crew chief and the gunner had M16s as theirs. When we were shot down, the M16s were handed to the pilots and the crew chief and gunner looked after the M60s.

An LZ preparation was usually 105mm artillery for ten minutes or so stopping a few moments prior to the arrival of the gunships and Smokey, a smoke trail laying aircraft, blanked out what was hoped might be the hot side of the LZ. It was quite dangerous work for Smokey as he was first in at the LZ so its crew had four M60s and their arrival at the LZ moments before the *Slicks* was always at maximum air speed possible (130 knots or so) and a few feet off the ground (5 – 10 at most). Occasionally we had a pair of fighters (F4 Phantoms or F105 Super Sabres) basically on call off a taxi rank to *prep* our LZ and it wasn't infrequent that we went into an LZ that had been done over by the B52s.

From then on, with up to dozens of company lifts in the day, every pick up and landing zone was always in the lap of the gods. You never knew if the first or any insertion was going to be hot or not. Returning as we frequently did to the previous day's area of operations did not guarantee a repeat performance, except perhaps in the notorious Ben Tré area in the Delta, so we always counted on a contested arrival. The NVA or VC however generally chose their ground well. Booby trapped LZs were common – wires, bamboo stakes, and assorted make-shift mines could sometimes be seen and avoided but not always.

Once the first troops were on the ground a seemingly quiet rice paddy LZ could erupt with dozens of the enemy standing up out of small spider holes and launching a blistering attack with AK-47s, RPG-2s and -7s and, if we stumbled into a larger formation as occurred numbers of times, 30mm machine guns:<sup>23</sup> then we were committed to a tough day not only reinforcing the troops already on the ground but also to rescue downed aircrew. Once the initial fury had passed, the rest of the day our company supported its troops with resupplies and MEDEVACs and finally to bring them home, late at night and often it was a hot withdrawal. Our aircraft was simple compared to today's well armoured counterparts but provided the bullets did not mesh up in the rotating machinery the Huey could take some incredible punishment and still keep flying.<sup>24</sup>

A four to five hour flying day was easy and probably only had three companies of a battalion (three lifts) inserted and withdrawn later. Eight to ten hours were not uncommon and could be the one battalion moved a number of times before going home or one company in contact and with others being inserted in blocking positions (easy) or into a hot LZ (hard). The long days were the worst – up to twelve and fourteen hours always meant a day of enemy contact,

---

<sup>23</sup> 8 February, 18 May, 23 October, and 23 December in 1968 and 2 February and 31 May in 1969 to name a few.

<sup>24</sup> As Lieutenant Bruce Crawford DSC can attest (one amongst many): on 8 February 1968, his aircraft took 25 hits and kept flying.

troops invariably wounded or killed, and aircraft hits if not shot down.<sup>25</sup> These days seemed to always involve our own casualties. In the twelve months of 1968/69 the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC had 13 of its own killed and another 25 wounded (of whom, two Australians killed and five wounded), close to one casualty in the 135<sup>th</sup> every 10 days or so.

Generally, the US Army's tactics at a contested LZ were to reinforce in place, never to back off and to call in heavier and more fire power as necessary. Sufficient is OK, more is better and too much is about right! In the case of the Eagle Flights with the US 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry, this was a normal tactic. We would break into two flights of five *Slicks* with two gunships each and a second make-shift C&C from the spare aircraft. Each group would test a number of separate LZs by landing but not disembarking the troops until someone took fire. At this point, the troops would then disembark and take on the enemy. It was not infrequent that the enemy chose his times well by coordinating a hot arrival for both flights leaving no options for immediate reinforcing.

Combat assault flying days were programmed for about five to seven days depending on the general tenor of operations and then for a rest, the company would be assigned to Direct Combat Support, known better as *Pigs and Rice* or *Hash and Trash*.<sup>26</sup> All ten *Slicks* and often four gunships would be tasked to a variety of small units in remote spots needing resupply of ammunition or equipment, moving a few personnel or resupply of an outpost under attack. We were all expected to do these tasks providing whatever assistance was not otherwise available on the scene. The gunships would usually be in reserve against another company needing back-up. All these missions were fraught with danger and could be more dangerous than a standard combat assault day.

Ready Reaction Force (RRF) was another duty. This involved a normal day's flying operations but instead of returning to our home base (Blackhorse or Bear Cat), we would go to places like Tay Ninh or Cu Chi in the north of III Corps near the border, to be ready for a night insertion of a relief force if a beleaguered out post had been overrun. My earliest experience of one of these nights was when I had only a few weeks in country. The incessant pounding next to our supposedly safe airfield took from raid after raid of the B52s bombing to within a couple of hundred yards of the airfield perimeter was awe-inspiring and frightening. The noise and shock waves kept us all awake most of the night. How we would have been able to leave the base for a mission through the barrage was beyond me.

While on combat assault, each and every company looked after its own affairs – the rescue of downed aircrew, MEDEVAC and resupply of the supported company and so on. The 147<sup>th</sup> *Hill Climber* Chinooks (CH-47A) had the job of getting our downed aircraft back home but we had to maintain a secure area around the aircraft for them to do their work of hooking up and lifting the aircraft and its crew out. Generally, once they had word of a downed aircraft, it could be lifted out in less than an hour.

On the *Pigs and Rice* days, we used flight following procedures from Capital Centre located at Tan Son Nhut airport. Radio traffic was always hectic yet these people were excellent in

---

<sup>25</sup> While there were troops to be moved, we kept flying, hot refuelling (not shutting down) as necessary and then back to the fray. My longest day was nearly 14 hours of flying, the first seven hours and last six or so were done without shutting down and the break between the two was 20 minutes before we had to be back at it. And this was not an isolated experience; all of us had these days.

<sup>26</sup> The only days the war seemed to stop officially were Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, and the Apollo Landing on 21 July 1969 (Vietnam date). There were still lots of aircraft movements on these non-combat days.

being able to track where you should be and to seek the assistance of others should the 'ops normal' call not be made on time.

### **Practice not Theory**

Fortunately most flying was by day so instrument flying was uncommon and our instrument skills of course deteriorated rapidly. This did not help when our days stretched into night combat assaults making the flying all that much more difficult. As everything the *Slicks* did was in formation, being led to a touch down in a dark clearing with no lights and virtually no ground references took some getting used to. It was no easier as the *Slick* leader with nine other aircraft nervously following your every move. The option of going around for another go was never countenanced – it had to be first time every time and made the flight leader's role crucial. Most of the time we were ten aircraft, but occasionally two companies would team up for a 20 aircraft insertion and on one memorable day, eight companies – 80 *Slicks* and attendant gunships – combat assaulted a vast open area for the CO 12<sup>th</sup> Group, *Hawk 6's* benefit.

Accidents were not infrequent – some believing they could fly instruments and finding out otherwise the hard way.<sup>27</sup> In the close and hectic confines of a hot LZ smashing into the ground or another aircraft was a comparatively minor hazard when the summer dust swirled up and obscured all vision. For all the risks, some amazing work was done at night such as on 20 December 1967, when a late afternoon hot insertion finally led to the troops being extracted with the flight under constant fire for over four hours from midnight into the early morning. Only two aircraft were hit but there were many troop casualties.<sup>28</sup>

Combat damage was mainly small arms fire and most pilots made the most professional landings if you were shot down by it. We flew at 1 500 feet when we could so as to stay clear of effective AK-47 fire but that did not always work.<sup>29</sup> Heavier calibre weapons were different. The Rocket Propelled Grenades – RPG-2 or -7 – or 30 or 50mm fire would generally take you down with one hit to the engine or gear box, the resultant arrival with the ground being largely a question of how much damage had been done to the controls or pilots.<sup>30</sup> The *EMU* shoot on 23 October 1968 where two aircraft were downed in the LZ, the first by an RPG fired from 70 yards and the second by 30mm machine gun are cases in point. The first aircraft was in the hover at ten feet or so and thumped in heavily when an RPG 2 took out the whole main gear box and rotor assembly. The second aircraft took multiple 30mm hits and crashed into a tree that finished up between the pilots. The first crew was rescued by an adjacent *Slick*. The second crew waited in a bomb crater and as their rescuers hovered in it, the VC looked on, not firing again until that crew was onboard and flying away.

---

<sup>27</sup> Sub Lieutenant Tony Heulin and crew were all killed on 3 January 1969 in appalling weather when they hit power lines near Bien Hoa. He was very low level following a road and probably not on instruments in this case. There were plenty of other instances where inexperienced pilots fatally failed their instrument flying.

<sup>28</sup> Ray Jones and Neil Ralph, *The First HFV in Max Speedy and Bob Ray*, Eds, *A Bloody Job Well Done: The History of the Royal Australian Navy Helicopter Flight Vietnam, 1967 – 1971*, Canberra, 2008, p 30. ISBN 978-0-646-50060-7

<sup>29</sup> Lieutenant Commander PJ Vickers was killed on 22 February 1968 when a round deflected off his rudder pedal while flying at this 'safe' height.

<sup>30</sup> On 8 August 1968, Lieutenant Tony Casadio, Petty Officer OC Phillips and their American co-pilot and crew chief were all killed when an RPG hit their gunship while flying low. With no options, they landed in a bomb crater with a force too great to survive.

With reinforcements called in that day, three *Slicks* and two gunships were downed and 14 aircraft took hits. There were no aircrew casualties.<sup>31</sup>

It was not always lots of hits and no casualties as the 13 killed and 25 wounded in the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC in 1968/69 can attest. The case of Leading Aircrewman Noel Shipp and his gunship crew are the best known to those in the Second Contingent RANHFV and nowadays also to many of the Australian public following the Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal report into unresolved recognition for past acts of gallantry and valour. Shipp and his gunship crew were defending a hot landing zone when they were shot down and all four, three Americans and Shipp were killed. Shipp was proposed to the Appeals Tribunal for consideration of a posthumous Victoria Cross which in the event was not agreed.<sup>32</sup> However his name and gallantry that day, hanging out of his doomed aircraft and firing all the way to the ground, will be remembered at the RAN Recruit School CERBERUS with one of the divisions there being named in his honour.

When Sub Lieutenant Tony Heulin was killed on 3 January 1969 Sub Lieutenant Jed Hart replaced him a week or so later. His description of his first ever combat assault is described in the RANHFV's book<sup>33</sup> as follows:

I flew with Max Speedy first up. In the jargon of Vietnam I was his Peter Pilot. Max had a seasoned look about him, with steady eyes and a bushy beard. He wore weathered Nomex fatigues and a .38 revolver on his hip like the rest of us, but with two crumpled gold stripes on his shoulder to show his superior status as a Lieutenant.

The helicopter wasn't like Australian Navy aircraft – it was battered and patched like an old pick-up truck with buckets for ammunition, ammo belts and assorted weapons strapped about the place. The helicopter had no doors. I strapped in with body armour and Flak vest on and slid the chicken plate forward and .38 around. The plexiglass of the chin window looked dreadfully thin, but oddly once the business of winding up a flight of ten helicopters and light fire team of four and getting off to the Delta started, it was interesting, and the worries slipped away. It was busy; really busy. We got down to the Delta, refuelled, picked up our first load of a hundred ARVN, and we were on our way to what would be my first Combat Assault.

Later, with hundreds of Combat Assaults under my belt, I wouldn't recall one PZ or LZ from another. But that day I remember Zork Rohrsheim our Air Mission Commander guiding the Lead ship of the flight to "land short of the three burning helicopters." I thought about our Nowra work-up where we had trundled happily in to land in neat formation and hovered gently down onto the grass. When you're

---

<sup>31</sup> Bob Kyle, *Magnet Arse* in Max Speedy and Bob Ray, Eds, *A Bloody Job Well Done: The History of the Royal Australian Navy Helicopter Flight Vietnam, 1967 – 1971*, Canberra, 2008, pp 215-6. ISBN 978-0-646-50060-7

<sup>32</sup> Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal *The Report of the Inquiry into Unresolved Recognition for Past Acts of Naval and Military Gallantry and Valour*, Chapter 18, Canberra, 2013.

<sup>33</sup> Jed Hart *No Surprises, Please* in Max Speedy and Bob Ray, Eds, *A Bloody Job Well Done: The History of the Royal Australian Navy Helicopter Flight Vietnam, 1967 – 1971*, Canberra, 2008, pp 193-5. ISBN 978-0-646-50060-7

training, of course, the machine gun rounds go in only one direction; there is no shooting back. This wasn't like that at all. There were rockets and mini gun being pumped into the tree lines bordering our LZ by our own light fire team, and our machine gunners and crew chiefs were hammering away with M-60s as hard as they could go from every slick, but we were still under heavy fire. When you are in a flight of ten helicopters you aren't weaving and ducking, you are following your leader, slowing down and coming to a halt right where the shooting is. It wasn't a comfortable feeling. Our helicopters stayed in the hover seconds while troops were hurled out into the paddies; it was done quickly, but we were all no faster than the slowest ship. Once we'd completed the first insertion we flew off for another load so we could do it again.

Bloody hell, I thought. Max thought it was funny. "Welcome to Vietnam" he said.



The Author, Bear Cat 1969

### A Diary of Sorts

A diary of some of the events of the first two RANHFV contingents is informative as to the hectic pace of its first two years with the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC. This is not to imply that the third or fourth contingents did not have their share of actions but all told with Tet I and II during the HFV's first two years and events in South Vietnam slowing to some degree, from late 1969 on there were fortunately, no more Australians killed although some more were wounded. While the following list is only of actions that included Australians, there were many that did not include us because we were not flying that day. But, Australian or American, we all had common cause in the 135<sup>th</sup>.

In all of these actions there were always American crew chiefs and mostly US Army gunners as it was their aircraft we flew. The eight pilots and four aircrewmembers in each contingent were permanently flying or being gunners and as a rule we logged 1 200 – 1 400 hours for our

year.<sup>34</sup> The four observers did fly in the gunner role on occasion but were more usefully employed in a variety of 222 Battalion and 12 Group positions as operations planners and the like. Additionally, a number of the maintenance personnel took up gunner roles from time to time. When an aircraft could be repaired in the field, a team of maintenance personnel would arrive to see what they could do and it was standard practice for every person to man an M60 in the repair aircraft. Some maintainers liked the gunner job and a few spent many hours on combat assaults as well as fulfilling their duties on the maintenance line at night.

So, of around 50 aircrew in all contingents permanently flying, there were 30 Fleet Air Arm casualties – five killed and 25 wounded in the four years the RANHFV was in Vietnam. A 60 percent casualty rate is disproportionate to the all-Australian total but simply reflects the fact that the RANHFV was integrated into an American fighting unit at the height of the Vietnam War. We got the bloody job done.

**8 Jan 68:** 3 aircraft shot down. Lieutenant Bruce Crawford has 25 hits to his aircraft. He gets a Distinguished Service Cross while Specialist Class 4 Gary Wetzel US Army, in another company's aircraft is awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

**12 Jan 68:** 1 aircraft shot down; Leading Aircraft Handlers Wardle and French WIA.

**8 Feb 68:** 8 A/C hit, 2 crash, 4 KIA, 2 WIA.

**22 Feb 68:** LCDR Pat Vickers KIA, the RANHFV's first major casualty

**18 Apr 68:** 11 A/C hit, 2 shot down.

**18 May 68:** 10 A/C hit, 6 downed, 125 Troops WIA.

**19 Jun 68:** Lieutenants Leak and Craig, and Leading Aircrewman Green spiral in from 1500 feet – all injured but survive and are winched out by an RAAF aircraft.

**8 Aug 68:** Gunship hit by an RPG. Lieutenant Tony Casadio, Petty Officer OC Phillips and 2 US Army KIA.

**23 Oct 68:** Battle of Ben Tré; 14 A/c hit, 3 *Slicks* and 2 gunships shot down, reinforcements called in.

**23 Dec 68:** I lead a counter attack on an NVA Battalion that surrounds an ARVN Company and take a few hits for my trouble and then return for a MEDEVAC of wounded.

**Jan – Apr 69:** 135<sup>th</sup> AHC company aircraft take bullet hits on most days for that period.

**3 Jan 69:** Sub Lieutenant Tony Huelin and his crew KIA.

---

<sup>34</sup> In the author's case, 1 250 hours of which about 85 hours were night combat assaults; shot down properly once, and forced to land with bullet damage and be retrieved by Chinook in a couple of other cases. The number of bullet hits in the 20 – 30 range; we didn't count them all that accurately as they were common currency for all pilots. WO1 Bill Merkley, US Army had been shot down three times before he was 21 years old. Sub Lieutenant Bob Kyle was shot down twice and was called *Magnet Arse* for his troubles though he was by no means the only *Magnet Arse*. Most of the RANHFV pilots were downed one way or another.

**15 Jan 69:** I am shot down.

**2 Feb 69** Lieutenants Supple and Symons shot down by 50 cal in their gunship and rescued by Sub Lieutenants Perrott and Kyle after a running gun battle with the NVA.

**13 Feb 69:** Another gun ship shot down – Author to the rescue in a hot pick up.

**22 Feb 69:** Lieutenant Rick Symons WIA.

**31 May 69:** Leading Airman Noel Shipp and crew shot down and all killed.

**3 Jun 69:** Naval Aircraft Handler *Blue* St Clair WIA.

**21 Jul Apollo Landing.** The Vietnam War stops for the day and everyone is watching the event on five inch square black and white TV sets

**22 Jul 69:** *Slick* tail rotor failure; WO1 Dino Genchi US Army and crew of three all killed. The company CO and I recover the bodies.

And so it went on relentlessly.

### **The Final Tally**

The Huey has become the iconic symbol of the Vietnam War. It was a great aircraft, relatively simple and yet it could take lots of damage provided none of it meshed up too severely in the rotating parts. But there were still huge numbers of them shot down and taking their aircrews with them. With at least 100 American soldiers being killed in a ‘good’ week and up to 600 in a ‘bad’ one, and eventually more than 58 000 deaths the final call for America, it is no wonder the public wanted to stop the war.

Of the 7 013 Hueys that went to Vietnam according to the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots’ Association, nearly half (3 305) were destroyed and with them, 2 177 aircrew killed. Half the aircraft and two thirds of their crews casualties – not good statistics yet we loved the aircraft and were proud to have flown it in the most intense of environments. We were face to face with our enemy on many an occasion, taking hits, being shot down, having the closest of shaves and regular ‘there but for the grace of God moments’ and still flying the next day to do it all again.

I left the Navy in 1982 for other pastures but in 2005 was back in as a reservist and had the great fortune to fly with my son, an Army test pilot, in the Adelaide Vietnam Veteran’s fly past in 2007. With me was my old boss of the Second Contingent, Lieutenant Commander Graham ‘Zork’ Rohrsheim DSC RANR. He and I were reliving some old days of nearly 40 years past.

A/C Type	Numbers	Destroyed	Pilots KIA	Crew KIA
HU-1	80	80	36	17
UH-1A	8	1	0	0
UH-1B	729	376	139	144
UH-1C	696	415	167	158
UH-1D	1,926	1,028	224	247
UH-1E	156	100	39	41
UH-1F	31	18	4	5
UH-1H	3,375	1,285	457	487
UH-1L	2	0	0	0
UH-1M	5	0	5	3
UH-1N	2	2	0	0
UH-1P	3	0	3	1
<b>Totals</b>	<b>7,013</b>	<b>3,305</b>	<b>1,074</b>	<b>1,103</b>

Table 1: The fate of the Vietnam Hueys and Crews. (Source Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Assn.)



Father, Son, and Zork

It was pleasant to note that I could still hover albeit under my son's watchful eye. As we used to say, if you couldn't hover, you were queer.

Max Speedy,  
 Commander DSC RANR Ret.  
 Lieutenant RAN, 2-i-C Second Contingent, RANHFV, 1968/69.  
 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon Leader *Slicks*, and,  
 EMU 3 Operations Officer and Air Mission Commander,  
 135<sup>th</sup> Assault Helicopter Company US Army, Vietnam.