



CHOPPERS: HELICOPTERS AND THE VIETNAM WAR



MILITARY HISTORY AND
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THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE
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Choppers – Helicopters in Vietnam

Opening address

Dr Peter Edwards

I thank you for the honour of inviting me to open this conference.

First and foremost, I wish to congratulate Military History and Heritage Victoria for organising this conference and the National Vietnam Veterans Museum for hosting it. That is no token statement: it is genuinely important that a conference such as this should be held, and should be held at this time.

I say that because I believe that we have a problem. By “we” I mean not only Vietnam veterans and those close to them, but anyone of any generation interested in Australia’s involvement in the Vietnam War and in – to use an honoured military phrase – the lessons learned from that controversial commitment.

The problem is this. We Australians tend to focus our reflections on questions of war and peace at major anniversaries. There is usually nothing wrong with that, but over the next few years there is a real problem. The 50th anniversaries of many of the major events in Australia’s Vietnam War happen to coincide with the centenary of the 1914-18 War. For example, the fiftieth anniversary of the announcement of the commitment to Vietnam of the First Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment, falls within four days of the centenary of the Gallipoli landing; the 50th anniversary of Long Tan is close to the centenary of Fromelles and the other great battles of 1916; while the 50th anniversary of Tet, Coral-Balmoral, and all the other dramatic military and political events of 1968 are in the same year as the last year of the Great War, leading to the Armistice.

We know already that there will be great attention will be given to the centenary of ANZAC and everything associated with that and much else in the First World War. It is, of course, absolutely right that Australians should mark, and reflect upon, the enormous impact that the Great War, the war that unfortunately did not end all wars, had on the world and not least on Australia. If there is one statistic that every Australian child should know, it is that Australia lost 60,000 lives from a population of between four and five million.

But it is a regrettable side effect, a piece of collateral damage in historical terms, that this coincidence of timing means that it will be hard for veterans, for historians, indeed for anyone interested in matters of national security and international affairs, to gain much of the public’s attention in the coming years to the lessons to be learned from the Vietnam experience.

That matters. There are still important lessons to be learned from that Vietnam experience that are of direct relevance to the challenges facing Australia today and in the foreseeable future. Just in the last few days and weeks we have seen many references to Vietnam during discussions of the 10th anniversary of the Iraq commitment of 2003. Similarly, comparisons and contrasts are made concerning the withdrawal from, and aftermath of, the Vietnam commitment with the current withdrawal from Afghanistan. None of this is to say that any two commitments are identical. As Mark Twain famously put it, history does not repeat itself,

but sometimes it rhymes. The real value in placing current issues into their historical context comes from careful assessments of similarities and differences. That is how we should, how we must learn from history.

The lessons to be learned come in many areas – strategic, political, diplomatic, social – but of course they include operational. The helicopter was, as you all know, ubiquitous in Vietnam, serving many purposes, but its value was not always understood. The use of helicopters in support of ground operations became a major issue in relations between the RAAF and the Army, at every level from the men at the sharp end to the service Chiefs. My colleagues on the Official History have discussed these matters, from the perspective of both services, in several volumes. That experience in Vietnam had a lasting effect: it undoubtedly influenced the decision in the 1980s to place the new generation of helicopters, the Black Hawks, under the Army rather than the Air Force. There is a vivid contrast between the attitude towards helicopters of the RAAF's leaders in the 1960s and 1970s and those today, when a helicopter pilot such as Angus Houston can become not only Chief of Air Force but one of the most widely respected Chiefs of the Defence Force in recent decades.

I look forward today to hearing much of what was learned at the time from the experience of using helicopters during the Vietnam war, for many purposes and with many impacts. Conferences like this are occasions for recollection and reminiscence; especially as we approach ANZAC Day, it is an occasion to honour those who served, those who did not return, and those who returned impaired in whatever way. But the best way to honour service and sacrifice is to learn from experience, and never to stop the practice of learning. To that goal organisations like Military History and Heritage Victoria and the National Vietnam Veterans Museum contribute a great deal. I wish you them, and all of you well, in that purpose, today and into the future, and have great pleasure in officially declaring this conference open.



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