



# CHOPPERS: HELICOPTERS AND THE VIETNAM WAR



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MUSEUM, PHILLIP ISLAND BY  
MILITARY HISTORY AND HERITAGE VICTORIA

20 APRIL 2013



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# **A Tour of Duty with 161 (Independent) Reconnaissance Flight – an Experience to Remember – or an Event to Forget?**

**Tom Jobling, Sergeant (NCOIC) Engine Section, Nui Dat 1969 –  
1970.**



## **Introduction and Background:**

As the dull thud of spear or sword against thick leather is synonymous with the ancient Roman army battles: So too is the drone of a thousand heavy bombers, or the rumble of tanks, over Europe during WW2. But; it is the Wok, Wok, Wok of 'Huey' that enlivens memories of the Vietnam conflict! Although recognised as 'The Helicopter' of Vietnam it certainly was not the only chopper on active service. The Jolly Green Giant and the Sky Crane, along with the Chinook and others played important roles the Vietnam conflict. After about 1967 the Americans dispensed with the OH13 Sioux and employed the Cyuse (Hughes) and Kiowa (Bell) as observation platforms. Australia again added the OH13 (Sioux) when 161 Reconnaissance Flight deployed, with the composite 1 RAR Australian Force, to Bien Hoa during August 1965. At this time the Flight comprised a small maintenance team (mainly R.A.A.F. personnel), an Ordnance store (repair parts), Two Cessna 180 fixed wing aircraft and two Sioux 47G3B1 helicopters.

The Australian Army designation for the OH13 is 'Bell 47G3B1 Sioux' and its vital statistics are:

Capacity: Three seat observation Helicopter;

Rotor system: Two blades with an underslung stabilizer bar;

Engine: Lycoming TVO 435 vertically opposed, air cooled, six cylinders, turbocharged producing 370 HP!

Armament: Nil authorised!!

After a few months the contingent moved to Vung Tau in preparation of the upgrading of the Australian commitment to Task Force level. The Flight shared maintenance accommodation with 9 Squadron R.A.A.F. (Vung Tau) while Royal Australian Engineers prepared the Nui Dat location for occupation. Construction of Luscombe airfield occurred in conjunction with the development of Nui Dat base area. The move to Nui Dat saw the Flight gain full Independent status and a substantial increase in personnel. As a consequence of the relocation the engineer officer (Captain Peter Robinson) gained special recognition with the award of an M.B.E.

## **Unit Statistics:**

As everyone 'loves' numbers here are the Statistics for 161 and 161 (Indep) Recce. Flt.

Time in Country: 6 years and 4 Months

Total Personnel: About 896 (Some personnel served two and three tours)

Killed In Action (K.I.A.): 3 (Pilots)

Awards: M.B.E. - 1; D.F.C. - 14; Queens Commendation: - 1; M.I.D.-16;

Aircraft allotment: Cessna 180 X 4; Sioux 47G3B1 X 6 and Pilatus Porter X 3 (replaced Cessna).

We rotated all aircraft to Australia with replacements shipped in.

Hours Flown (Total): 72 thousand

Whilst in Vietnam a total of 37 Sioux flew 43,911 hours and 66,069 sorties.

While eight of the 37 Sioux suffered combat damaged beyond repair and destroyed in country; no pilots were K.I.A. in these aircraft! All three K.I.A. were subsequent to fixed wing aircraft incidents.

### **Operations and Tasking:**

The primary role, as the Unit title implies, was reconnaissance of the Task Force tactical area (Phuh Tuy Province). However the Unit engaged in several other operational related tasks. These included: forward observation post for Artillery fire onto known or suspected enemy positions or formation points. 161 Pilots often 'called in' Artillery fire to locations where enemy activity appeared to be very recent; and at times current. Unit aircraft frequently positioned an Artillery officer in an airborne location to direct artillery fire. The pilots of 161 were well trained in this role and frequently 'called in' field gun fire to suspected enemy locations. The use of artillery from the various 'fire support bases' became common place during my tour of duty. The use of artillery was certainly a good deterrent to any courageous 'Charlie'! Naval gunfire coordination and control was not uncommon.

Air-strike coordination and execution operations were frequent with almost daily engagement in this activity. USAF aircraft provided most air strike hardware. The Phantom F4E being the most common. On occasions the RAAF 2 Squadron Canberra's provided the bomb load. Unfortunately these were not popular as our 'on target time' was limited and the Canberra fairly slow at repositioning.

We provided first and last light reconnaissance of the roads and water ways of the Province. Both fixed and rotary wing aircraft engaged in this task. The fixed wing covered the outer perimeter while the (slightly) slower Sioux scanned an 'inner' perimeter. Frequently ground fire greeted this task; we had many hits, but no serious damage.

Psychological Operations, employing high density airborne loud speakers fitted to fixed wing aircraft, saturated an area with propaganda in local language; delivering a specific message appropriate to the time.

Electronic surveillance; a fixed wing assignment where specialist equipment endeavoured to locate enemy positions and detail movement or activity. We referred to this as the "Suhhhh" equipment! A long story for later in this paper.

Inter-organisational liaison; where 161 aircraft transported Task Force personnel (usually ranking Officers) to Fire Support Bases or other essential appointments.

Recovery of wounded personnel from difficult locations; There were times that the Huey's could not fit into the operational area! For example; an extract from Captain Coggan's DFC Award. "On 1 February 1968, an enemy reinforced battalion attacked Phuoc Le. Whilst supporting a reaction force from 1st Australian Task Force, Captain Coggan flew visual reconnaissance missions during the day and was fired upon by the enemy on a number of occasions. At approximately 2200 hours a casualty evacuation helicopter was unable to land in the Phuoc Le Market Place because of high power lines reducing the size of the landing zone. Captain Coggan volunteered to evacuate the wounded. He landed at the market place on three occasions, each time coming under fire, and completed the evacuation of the wounded."

### **Airstrike activity:**

An airstrike frequently accompanied a fire fight activity and the 'resident' 161 Sioux pilot would assist with target identification. This entailed dropping smoke to indicate the start and finish of a 'strike run'. As troops were in close proximity the smoke location demanded precision flying and accurate placement. To my knowledge we never bombed our own troops!

I often accompanied 161 pilots on these missions and acted as the observer and marker. The preferred smoke was red or yellow. These colours offered better visibility against the backdrop of the local vegetation. Although we carried white phosphorous (WP) grenades, we seldom used them in this role. They were better for getting 'Charlie' out of the bamboo! A young pilot demonstrated this process to me with (almost) devastating consequences. Enough said!

A programmed air strike occurred from an 'activity' being recorded. On these occasions the location became a free fire zone and we were often exposed to enemy ground fire. Although several choppers experienced damage from ground fire only a few were so disabled as to result in a crash.

During these operations smoke dropped marked the strike zone and the chopper would retire to a 'safe' distance. The strike aircraft would then deliver the ordinance. After waiting for debris to clear we would return to the site for a strike report. Sometimes up to six consecutive strikes would occur at the one site. Damage assessment included a body count if appropriate. Bodies were not uncommon following these strikes. Bill Flannigan and I produced 'a few'. Occasionally a strike would result in aggressive enemy activity against the Sioux which was then at very low level. From all of this 161 only lost one rotary wing aircraft pilot – and his death came from a fixed wing aircraft crash!

During one strike the pilot "sort of forgot where we were at" and re-entered the strike zone as the ordinance was released! Apart from a lot of dust and debris entering the chopper we escaped 'nerved up' but unhurt! I cannot repeat my conversation with him!

Various American and Australian strike aircraft participated in the strikes. I even worked with a Canberra of 2 Squadron on occasions. The Phantom F4E's were the most common aircraft that I encountered. These were excellent close proximity strike aircraft: fast and accurate in the execution of a strike.

### **First and Last Light Reconnaissance Flights:**

First light reconnaissance flights occurred every day. Even Christmas Day. At these times pilots would disappear into the morning mist (or rain or dust) and survey the roads and waterways of the Province: Often detecting recent enemy movement, especially along the beach area.

Roadblocks were common and the occasional sighting of remnants of last night's 'terrorism' activity occurred. Maintenance personnel frequently accompanied these missions. Some of us became very professional in identifying activity and even the load weight by the footprints in the sand! I remember one with Damian Aird where we tried to get some fishermen to return to shore. They did not want to oblige, even after a short burst from my M16. A very low level (wheels almost on the water) attack changed their mind in a hurry!

These early morning escapades frequently resulted in ground fire aimed at the pesky aircraft. Sometimes a hit - sometimes not, just the bang! One with Errol Driver resulted in a hit onto the observer seat at about what would have been bellybutton position! No Pax = no injury! Bill Flanagan showed me how to locate the enemy by 'smelling the air' early in the morning! This proved a very successful process for locating camps and staging points. The smell 'oozed up' through the canopy. A smell you never forget!

Last light flights also produced interesting results. One evening the chopper pilot 'noticed' a strange item on the ground just outside the perimeter. Closer inspection produced a mortar base plate. Lucky find and good result later that night when S.A.S. spooked the intruders from atop S.A.S. hill!

### **Psychological Operations:**

Using pre-recorded messages and a high density public address system the fixed wing (Cessna and later Porter) aircraft over-flew designated areas in an endeavour to entice the enemy to surrender. Sometimes it worked; sometimes they paid us no heed!

The system provided Christmas cheer for the Task Force area at Christmas 1969. Loaded with carols and other Christmas tunes we spent about 30 minutes serenading the troops (and the General). He did not complain as such but a simple request for "peace and quiet" had the desired effect!

### **Electronic surveillance:**

Again the fixed wing aircraft provided this service to the Task Force. Special electronic surveillance equipment probed enemy communications; we referred to this operation as "Ssshhh"; due to a particular event when a politician visiting us asked a question of the gear: Another pilot, standing behind the Polly, "Shussed" the young officer. And so 'Shuss' became a tactical entity.

I do not know how many missions were flown under 'Shuss' but I do know that we expended many hours attempting to get 'Charlie' to give up and come in from the wet, the hot and the dry. Many did, some just wouldn't take the hint!

### **Were we armed?**

Officially no! But I can refute that statement with a bit of information.

There were three main configurations of offensive armament fitted to some of our Sioux. The M79 grenade launcher was an exception and I never used it as a weapon. The 'Big Black Gun' GPMG M60 certainly posed a threat to Charlie and his Northern brothers. We operated two systems; one had a fixed location and was pilot operated. The other had a pintal mount from the forward skid tube and had a crewman to operate it. Our enemy had many encounters with it mounted in Hueys but I think, they never expected our 'Bones belong Bolus' (Pidgin for a bird's skeleton) to get this serious!

I flew many missions with Frank Mackrow and Bill Flanagan during my tour of duty. I never really felt comfortable; unless I had 'The Big Black Gun' with me. Night gun ship operations became a norm for our operations. A Porter stationed at several thousand feet provided light with flares while the Sioux, at only several feet, engaged any possible target. Our main problem for the crew operated GPMG was the turbo charger; glowing bright red at night and facing the enemy. Whether we did any damage or not remains a mystery but I recall one night with Frank when we sighted movement on the ground and engaged it. The next morning an ARVN Platoon swept the area and 'met with resistance' resulting in five bodies being recorded. One must wonder just when those beings became bodies?

That being said you may wonder if "A Tour of Duty with 161 (Indep) Recce Flight was "An Experience to Remember, or an Event to Forget". I lost two very good friends and fine Officers during my time!

As I look back now – over forty years later – I see young and enthusiastic men; committed to the task at hand, forgoing personal pleasantries, to fulfil an order of the government of the day. We were a solid team, of all ranks and Corps, united in an endeavour to get the job done. We can hold our heads high at our contribution to this conflict. Our pilots were exemplary, our R.A.E.M.E. personnel dedicated and the supporting troops competent in their varied roles!

Some tasks were not very pleasant, some were very gratifying. Having been a Section leader committed to the serviceability of our aircraft I am proud of my troops and the records we set. Our rate of survivability was exceptional and the turnaround times bordering on unbelievable. For example a D6 engine change took over a week 'at home'. We did these in just 8 hours from last flight to 'test flown serviceable'! On one occasion while we were in the midst of one of these events the General visited the Unit. Passing thru the hangar he asked Stu Curnow, "What's going on here"? The response "Oh, Just an engine change"! Sort of deflated us a bit!

### **Other Activities:**

#### **Patrolling:**

Although a flying unit we also undertook 'normal Army type' activities. These included Tactical Area of Responsibility (T.O.A.R.) patrols. Generally these patrols were composite unit activities drawing the personnel from the support Units within the Nui Dat area. Normal T.O.A.R. patrol duration was around 24 hours. One six one (independent) Reconnaissance Flight mounted at least one full scale patrol lasting five days. This is normal Infantry Battalion patrol time. As I had 'arrived' in country just six days before this patrol set out I have little knowledge of how or why the Flight undertook the project. The consequence was that I had one Corporal and three fitters 'off line' while they were out. It also meant that the remaining five engine section personnel work load increased greatly. We still maintained the aircraft at 100 percent serviceability during those five days. I was one very relieved Sergeant when all my soldiers returned safely. The airframe section also experienced personnel shortage during that patrol time.

#### **Civilian Support:**

Apart from operational activities some Unit personnel engaged in civil support programmes. These included assisting with construction of a football (Soccer) pitch at the Baria High School and visiting a convent where local orphans were cared for. An incident worth mentioning explains just how insecure we could be in relation to our enemy. Following the opening of the soccer pitch, and an enjoyable afternoon, we returned to Nui Dat. Later that same night a contingent of Viet Cong engaged with a Platoon from 6 R.A.R. The only casualty was the Headmaster of the school.

We escorted the Nuns and children to Vung Tau for an occasional recreational day out and swim on the beach. Such events left a lifelong impression on those involved.

The Unit 'entertained' an entertainment group from Australia one afternoon. This was a welcome respite from the normality of daily life at 'The Dat'.

### **Conclusion:**

Having served (and been friends) with officers of the calibre of Frank Markcrow, Bill Flannigan, Peter Bysouth and Barry Donald, to name a few, I feel humbled.

I have many fond memories of those days, but I also have some very sad recollections! I no longer ponder the "what if" questions as I did for so many years; and I no longer feel ashamed or embarrassed to say; "I am a Vietnam Veteran"!

I believe that my "Tour of Duty with 161 Indep. Recce. Flt." Was definitely an Experience to Remember, with a few "Events I cannot forget"!

Thank you for your interest in aviation and the stories of the choppers, their pilots and ground crews during the Vietnam conflict. May those who made the supreme sacrifice Rest in Peace, knowing they did their job; and those who did return learn to live with their memories.

Tom Jobling  
(Sergeant, Engine Section 1969-1970)

Appendix 1 to **A Tour of Duty with 161 (Independent) Reconnaissance Flight – an Experience to Remember – or An Event to Forget?**

**161 RECCE FLT AND 161 (INDEP) RECCE FLT**

<b>DATE</b>	<b>SEQUENCE OF EVENTS</b>
June 1965	161 Recce Flight raised at RAAF Base Amberley.
12 Sep 65	161 Recce Flight parade at Amberley prior to departing for South Vietnam.
14 Sep 65	<p>HMAS Sydney sailed from Brisbane in company with HMAS Melbourne and HMAS ANZAC. 7 Officers, 42 Or's, 2xCessna 180s and 2xBell 47 Sioux's.</p> <p>** The Commanders Diary has it recorded as 7 Officers and 41 OR's.</p> <p>Lt Purvis and WO2 Scafe flew to Vietnam as the advance party for 161 Recce Flt.</p>
19 Sep 65	HMAS Sydney refuels at Manus Island.
20 Sep 65	Departed Manus Island with HMAS Vendetta and HMAS Duchess.
25 Sep 65	HMAS Sydney berthed at Subic Bay for refuel.
28 Sep 65	Anchored off the coast of Vung Tau. The two Sioux helicopters were flown off HMAS Sydney to Vung Tau airfield. The two Cessna's were lifted off HMAS Sydney to Vung Tau airfield by H-34s (US Army Sikorsky - Choctaw)
29 Sep 65	Two Sioux depart Vung Tau for Bien Hoa.
01 Oct 65	Cessna's arrive at Bien Hoa.
22 Oct 65	First operational sortie – Recce for 1RAR in TAOR for next operation.
31 Oct 65	<p>Summary of Sorties and Flying Hours since arriving at Vung Tau on 28 Sep 65:</p> <p><b>Fixed Wing:</b> 16 Sorties and 42.55hrs.</p> <p><b>Rotary Wing:</b> 76 Sorties and 41.20 hrs.</p>
02 Apr 66	Capt Bevan Smith in A1-395 hit by ground fire whilst on Recce Mission, wounded in left hand, forced landing in nearby ARVN outpost. Pilot medevaced to Australia.
22 Apr 66	Flt Lt Don Tidd (RAAF Eng. O.) marched into the unit on detachment.
10 May 66	Approx. 70% of unit stores plus small guard party transported to Saigon, LSM loading point.
11 May 66	Movement of personnel to Vung Tau postponed to 13 May.
13 May 66	Main Body (3 Officers, 33 OR's, 5 Land Rovers & Trailers) departed Bien Hoa for Saigon. Embarked by LSM arrived Vung Tau, 1700hrs.
16 May 66	Aircraft arrived at Vung Tau. Rear party of 1 Officer and 4 OR's at Bien Hoa.

23 May 66	Rear party arrived - all 161 Recce Flt at Vung Tau.
01 Jun 66	161 Recce Flt re-designated 161 (Indep) Recce Flt.
05 Jun 66	Unit ceased operating under command of 173 Airborne Brigade (Separate) and began direct support of 1 Australian Task Force.
07 Jun 66	Four additional Bell 47s and one Cessna 180 arrived in Vietnam aboard HMAS Sydney. Total strength of the unit at 1600 hrs was 15 Officers and 78 Other Ranks.
31 Oct 66	Cessna A98-045 with Major L.G. Doyle and Capt T.J. Wright was the first fixed wing aircraft to land on the new airfield at Nui Dat.
05 Dec 66	The airfield at Nui Dat was officially opened by Brigadier O.D. Jackson, Commander 1 ATF when he unveiled a commemorative plaque, naming the airfield 'Luscombe Field'.
22 Mar 67	Unit commenced move to new location at Nui Dat.
24 Mar 66	Move to Nui Dat completed except for rear party at Vung Tau.
10 Apr 67	Rear party from Vung Tau arrived at Nui Dat. The Flight's former living area at Vung Tau was closed and handed back to 1ALSG.
29 Apr 67	Brigadier S.C. Graham, OBE presented the Queens Commendation for brave conduct to 2Lt. R.W. Askew.
23 May 68	The OC of the Flight, Capt George Constable, was shot down and killed whilst flying a US Army O1-G Bird Dog.
01 Jul 68	The Corps of Army Aviation was formed at RAAF Base Amberley, QLD.
Nov 69	Three Pilatus Porter fixed wing aircraft arrive in Vietnam.
03 Dec 69	Capt Barry Donald and 2Lt Alan Jellie were shot down and killed in Porter A14-686, whilst night flying.
28 Jun 71	Pilot training commenced at Vung Tau with the 5th Aviation Detachment for conversion onto the OH58A Kiowa helicopter.
24 Jul 71	Saw the arrival of the first of eight OH58A's at the unit.
01 Oct 71	The Main Body of the unit departed Nui Dat for Vung Tau.
05 Oct 71	The unit area at Nui Dat was handed over to 4RAR and the rear party.
15 Nov 71	Lt. Grant Steel was shot down whilst flying one of the OH58A Kiowa's. Pilot and passenger were not hurt; aircraft was recovered back to Vung Tau.
19 Dec 71	Three OH58A's returned to the US Army.
13 Dec 71	The Pilatus Porters withdrawn from service and prepared for return to Australia in Jan 72.
23 Dec 71	The main body of 161 (Indep) Recce Flt departed Vung Tau for Tan Son Nhut and return to Australia by Defence Charter aircraft.
01 Jan 72	Four Porters towed from the airfield at Vung Tau to the Do Long Pier to be loaded aboard the Harima Maru (Japanese Freighter) to be returned to Australia.
02 Feb 72	The remaining four OH58A's were handed back to the US Army prior

	to the rear party returning to Australia on 07 March 1972.
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Appendix 2 to **A Tour of Duty with 161 (Independent) Reconnaissance Flight – an Experience to Remember – or An Event to Forget?**

**Summary of Sioux Aircraft Tail Numbers and Dates of Service in Vietnam.**

<b>Aircraft No</b>	<b>Dates in/out 161</b>	<b>Aircraft Status</b>
A1-394	28 Sept 65 to 30 Apr 67	
	Aug 67 to Oct 68	CAT 5 - Tocumwal - New South Wales - 15 Nov 69.
A1-395	28 Sept 65 to 10 Oct 66	CAT 5 - Vietnam - Pilot Bill Davies
A1-396	Jun 67 to Dec 67	
	Oct 68 to Jun 69	Indonesian Aid 78 - H4712.
A1-397	Jun 67 to Oct 67	
	Jan 68 to Sept 68	Currently being rebuilt to flying status at Bankstown Airport.
A1-398	Dec 67 to Jan 68	Training Aid at RAAF Base Wagga 1975.
A1-399	Feb 68 to Nov 68	Training Aid at RAAF Base Wagga 1975.
A1-400	Jun 66 to 22 Nov 67	CAT 5 - Vietnam - Pilot Roger Colclough
A1-401	Nov 66 to 20 Nov 67	CAT 5 - Vietnam - Pilot Paddy O'Brien
A1-402	Jun 68 to Apr 69	Training Aid at RAAF Base Wagga 1975.
A1-403	Apr 67 to 02 Jun 67	CAT 5 - Vietnam - Pilot Ross Hutchinson
A1-404	07 Jun 66 to 30 Apr 67	
	Nov 67 to Sept 68	Static Display at Australian War Memorial - Canberra.
A1-405	Feb 68 to Sept 68	Static Display at RAAF Museum Point Cook - Victoria.
A1-407	May 67 to Feb 68	Static Display at Army Museum at Bandiana - Victoria.
A1-408	Jun 66 to Sept 67	
	Dec 67 to Oct 68	Sold - VH-KSO - 18 Aug 84.
A1-409	Jun 66 to Sept 67	CAT 5 - Vietnam - Pilot Blair Weaver
A1-635	Nov 68 to Apr 69	
	Sept 69 to 25 Mar 70	CAT 5 - Vietnam - Pilot Bob Hills
A1-637	Jun 70 to 09 Nov 70	CAT 5 - Vietnam - Pilot Terry Hayes
A1-638	Dec 68 to Jun 69	
	Jul 70 to Jan 71	Indonesian Aid 78 - H4711.

A1-639	Dec 68 to 18 Feb 69	CAT 5 - Vietnam - Pilot Ted Brooker
A1-640	Mar 69 to Aug 69	Static Display at Naval Air Museum at NAS Nowra - NSW.
A1-641	Jul 70 to Mar 71	CAT 5 - Lanefield - Queensland - 28 Sept 71.
A1-644	Apr 69 to Sept 69	CAT 5 - Tinaroo - Queensland - 29 Mar 71.
A1-645	Nov 68 to May 69	Indonesian Aid 78 - H4710.
A1-646	Apr 69 to Sept 69	Indonesian Aid 78 - H4709.
A1-673	Nov 68 to Jun 69	Sold - VH-HMI - 29 Mar 85.
A1-720	Nov 68 to Jul 69	Static Display at Museum of Australian Army Flying Oakey.
A1-721	May 71 to Aug 71	Indonesian Aid 78 - H4708.
A1-722	Aug 69 to Mar 70	
	Sept 70 to May 71	CAT 5 - Mt Wilhelm - Papua New Guinea - 29 Nov 73.
A1-727	Apr 70 to Jul 70	
	Nov 70 Aug 71	?????
A1-728	Apr 70 - Aug 70	
	Mar 71 to Aug 71	Indonesian Aid 78 - H4706.
A1-729	Apr 69 to Feb 70	
	Aug 70 to Apr 71	Indonesian Aid 78 - H4705.
A1-731	Jun 69 to Mar 70	CAT 5 - West Malaysia - 05 Mar 73.
A1-732	Jul 69 to Apr 70	
	Oct 70 to Jul 71	Static Display at Museum of Australian Army Flying Oakey.
A1-734	Apr 70 to Oct 70	
	May 71 to Aug 71	CAT 5 - Ioma - Papua New Guinea - 24 Aug 72.
A1-736	Apr 69 to Feb 70	Indonesian Aid 78 - H4702.
A1-737	Jun 69 to Apr 70	Indonesian Aid 78 - H4701.
A1-738	Aug 69 to Apr 70	The last of the Sioux delivered to the Australian Army.
	Jan 71 to 13 Sept 71	Static Display at Museum of Australian Army Flying Oakey.