

**Chief of Navy Address at Royal Australian Navy Helicopter Flight  
– Vietnam and the Royal Australian Navy Detachment,  
9 Squadron Vietnam Commemorations**

16 October 2017

*HMAS Albatross*

The first Commanding Officer of Royal Australian Navy Helicopter Flight – Vietnam, Rear Admiral Neil Ralph.

The third Commanding Officer of Royal Australian Navy Helicopter Flight – Vietnam, Commodore David Farthing.

Commander Fleet Air Arm, Commodore Chris Smallhorn.

Commanding Officer *HMAS Albatross*, Captain Fiona Sneath.

Colonel Tom Staadt, former Commanding Officer 135th Assault Helicopter Company.

Lieutenant Colonel Fred Dunaway, former Commanding Officer 135th Assault Helicopter Company.

And most importantly — the members of the Royal Australian Navy Helicopter Flight – Vietnam and the Royal Australian Navy Detachment, 9 Squadron Vietnam along with their families and friends.

I am pleased to be here today and to be able to officially dedicate this memorial which recognises the service of the men of the Royal Australian Navy Helicopter Flight – Vietnam and the Royal Australian Navy Detachment, 9 Squadron Vietnam.

I would like to start by recognising the efforts of Ted Wynberg, who sadly recently passed away, and John Macartney — without their efforts this day would not have been possible.

I would also like to recognise the support of the Fleet Air Arm and in particular 723 Squadron and the Fleet Air Arm Museum. I am truly thankful for your support in making it possible to place this memorial here.

Sub-Lieutenant Andy Perry had had a long day. After flying for eight hours in the skies above South Vietnam, the 21-year-old navy pilot from Tasmania answered a call to assist in a night mission — landing South Vietnamese soldiers in the middle of enemy territory.

In his United States Army Iroquois, Perry led a group of nine aircraft to the landing zone, taking heavy enemy machine-gun fire.

Just before he landed a bullet came through the windshield and he felt blood on his face.

Perry watched as the troops jumped out of the helicopter and they all fell over – dead – from fire from a heavy machine-gun. A piece of shrapnel bounced off the pedals, hitting him in the foot.

Perry took part in three more landings that day and eventually nursed his damaged aircraft back to base.

The nearly-new Iroquois was damaged beyond repair. For his efforts Perry was Mentioned in Despatches, recommended for the American Silver Star, and awarded the South Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry.

Actions such as this were common for members of a unique Australian unit in Vietnam.

The Royal Australian Navy's Helicopter Flight Vietnam was formed in response to a request from the United States for more helicopter pilots in South Vietnam.

And because of Australia's other Vietnam commitments, the only available pilots were from the Navy's Fleet Air Arm.

In July 1967, it was announced that the HFV would be created and combined with the US Army's 135th Assault Helicopter Company.

Following just an eight week training period the first contingent consisting of eight pilots, four observers, four aircrewmen, 24 maintainers and six administrative staff arrived in Vietnam 50 years ago today.

When the flight was fully integrated with the 135th, the whole company comprised 70 officers, 230 men and 30 Iroquois helicopters, divided into three platoons.

Because the unit was experimental in nature, the Americans nicknamed it — EMU — clearly they did not do their research and work out that Emu's can't fly.

Between 1967 and June 1971, four contingents of the HFV served in South Vietnam. It was one of only two Australian units to be fully integrated into an American company and as a former American company commander Major Paul Raetz commented “[It] worked out real well”.

The company's role was simple – to provide transport and support for units of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, the United States Army and Marine Corps, and the Australian Army – but as it would turn out doing that role was anything but straightforward.

EMU pilots and crews were almost immediately involved in flying troops into operations. Within a few months, each pilot and crew was averaging between 120 and 130 flying hours per month, the equivalent of a year's flying time back here in Australia.

And the work was extremely dangerous — it was estimated in 1970 that EMU pilots carrying soldiers into an operation could expect to be fired at on every second mission.

The other invaluable component of the unit, also working extremely long hours, was the maintenance section. The men in these crews worked 24 hours a day to ensure that a full complement of aircraft was always ready to fly. The work was intense.

It will come as no surprise then that the HFV received the greatest number of casualties of Australian Navy units with five men killed in action and a large number wounded.

And it was the most highly decorated Australian Navy unit during the war — three members of the HFV were made Members of the Order of the British Empire, eight awarded Distinguished Service Crosses, five awarded Distinguished Flying Crosses and many others were awarded other Imperial honours.

Later today we will have the honour of further recognising the men of the HFV and their achievements.

The final contingent of the HFV returned to Australia on 16 June 1971, ending its four-year commitment.

In addition to the service that the HFV undertook in Vietnam, eight Navy pilots during 1968 and into 1969 also served with the Royal Australian Air Force's No. 9 Squadron.

The squadron was posted to Vietnam with the specific task of operating in direct support of the 1st Australian Task Force. It undertook similar roles — and under many of the similar pressures — to the HFV.

These pilots' service was just as outstanding, with two being awarded Distinguished Flying Crosses and two others Mentioned in Despatches.

Today we honour the service and sacrifice of those men who served in the HFV and the Navy pilots in 9 Squadron. They deserve to be counted alongside all those whose selfless courage has contributed to shaping our national character.

We thank you and honour you, just as we thank and honour the families of those who served.

As a Navy — and a nation — we must never forget the service and sacrifice of those Australians who served their nation in the Vietnam War.

My fervent hope is that gatherings like ours today and the dedication of this memorial help in the healing process.

Lest We Forget.