

GOORANGAI

OCCASIONAL PAPERS OF THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN NAVAL RESERVE PROFESSIONAL STUDIES PROGRAM

VOLUME 1 NUMBER 4

JUNE 2005

RECOLLECTIONS: FLYING WITH THE 135th AHC IN VIETNAM

A couple of weeks ago, my old friend and one time OIC (LCDR 'Zork' Rohrshiem) sent me a videotape to transfer to a DVD. The ABC had made it during our time in Vietnam with the 135th Assault Helicopter Company in 1968. It seems like a million years ago and while I remember my dreadful interview I didn't know that anyone had kept it. Fortunately my part in the show was without voice-over so we are spared that. But there we were and all sorts of memories came flooding back. I had just reread Robert Mason's chilling book, *Chickenhawk*, and that only added to the many things you think you will never forget.

So what do I remember? Well, amongst other things, I recall just how unpopular the war was and, surprisingly now perhaps, it was just as strongly so in our Navy. The day I received my orders to go events that I had no idea could possibly involve me had fallen into place. Another Iroquois pilot, newly married like me, had been killed in a flying accident. He was a part of the second contingent of the Helicopter Flight Vietnam (HFV). Apparently I was the first reserve – lots of others seemed to know what was in store except me. I well remember the grin on Commander (Air)'s face as he was telling me and the shock and disbelief of my wife of only a few weeks as I told her that night.

The first Helicopter Flight had gone to combat almost without me knowing it as I'd been on pilot's course with the RAAF. As my best friend, David, and I cleaned up all the prizes the Air Force had to offer I thought a place for me in our new A4 Skyhawk was a guarantee. You guessed it, David got a place and I didn't – not a happy camper as they say.

So with a fair bit of fumbling I became a passable helicopter pilot and began my part as XO of the contingent. As none of the first group had come back yet we really didn't have too many other ideas on what was in store for us. We flew very sedate flying patterns over Beecroft Range at 1000 feet firing a few rounds from an M60 and we lifted a few 7RAR soldiers here and there.

We went to Canungra in Queensland, for the Army's Battle Efficiency Course, a misnomer if ever there was one. Can you imagine how we felt arriving in our nice whites with suitcases and being unceremoniously told our tent was the third one down Line 8 – where was the Wardroom for goodness sake? Every day from 0500 we became very fit little 'grunts', swimming rivers in full battle gear, running, jumping, climbing, shooting and falling into our tents exhausted after dusk. But we came out of there fit, still not knowing what combat was like but getting the distinct impression of what it was like to be fodder. As we were fighting communists (albeit Asian ones) it seemed appropriate for the School to be run by an Army Major from Hungary who had experience of the Russians in 1956. He and his staff seemed more interested in finding out who the sympathisers were. One day in a lecture on how democratic we were, and how much 'they' weren't, and with staff strategically placed around the room, there was a 'Hands up if you are a Communist'. I spoil it by laughing loudly.

The story of how the Fleet Air Arm became involved with the US Army is a little apocryphal. Apparently Navy had a surplus of pilots and with the RAAF supporting Army, it seemed reasonable to offer our services. The answer from the RAAF was something like this – wear our (RAAF) uniforms, have substan-

tive rank, Navy rates of pay and you are welcome. Fortunately for us ADM Victor Smith thanked them kindly and not long after, the US Army snapped up his offer. We had virtually nothing to do with the Australian Army or the RAAF except for a fairly regular beer run to Vung Tau in whichever aircraft was spare at the time. We took over from the first group in September 1968 at Camp Blackhorse about 60km north of the Australian Army who were stationed at Nui Dat and about 5000km from civilisation. It took me a year to work out why those we relieved had such huge smiles on their faces.

ADM Smith visited us during that changeover and was most impressed (as he should have been) with the newest of the US Army's Cobras in which he had a flight. Having been checked out in tents at Canungra, it was not too much of a shock to live in another. My biggest problem for the first few months was learning to distinguish between the incessant *crack-whoosh* and *whoosh-crack*. One is incoming and the other outgoing. After that I could get a decent night's sleep and even slept through some of the latter.

The 135th was like all the other Assault Helicopter Companies in Vietnam at that time – each had 20 UH1-H *Slicks*, or Hueys, for the troops, 8 HU1-B *Gunships*, an UH1-H with extra radios for the Command and Control team, and a maintenance unit UH1-H. We also had a *Smokey* UH1-H fitted to lay smoke (oil in the exhaust) as we got to the Landing Zones. So with 31 aircraft, we had to provide 10 *Slicks* (Call sign *Emu*), 4 gunships (callsign *Taipans* of course) plus Command and Control (C&C) and *Smokey*, for our part every day. As Platoon Leader I flew for much of the year in *Slicks* and later as Operations Officer and C&C pilot alternating daily with Zork. Our US Army Major CO flew some C&C missions but he wasn't all that keen on flying. The "EMU" came from Experimental Military Unit, the strange combination of US Army and Aussie Navy that had never been seen before or since that I know of. We weren't really fish out of water for more than a day or so – you just couldn't take that long to adjust.



UH-1 Slicks of the 135th Assault Helicopter Company approaching a LZ in trail to extract troops (Image provided courtesy of CMDR M. Speedy, DSC, RANR)

At any one time in 1968, there were around 1000 helicopters airborne lifting troops and getting shot at and shot down. At one stage we were down to 17 of our 31 aircraft but still had to provide 16 each day. The mighty US stores machine simply could not keep up with



the attrition rate or the hours we flew. A standard assault company was programmed to fly 1500 hours per month but we regularly flew 3000 – 3500. Pilots flew on average 120 hours per month and 150 or more was not uncommon. For the year we all came away with at least 1200 hours compared with 150 - 200 per year at home.

A standard assault would consist of the C&C with his 'Back Seat' Battalion Commander and if he was South Vietnamese with poor English, an American 'adviser' would accompany us. An artillery spotter made up that team. These people would then coordinate the leader of the 10 *Slicks* from the Pick-up Zone to the Landing Zone. The gunships would be close by. If we were in for expected resistance, we usually had 105mm artillery preparation for a few minutes prior to landing, sometimes a USAF air strike and, if things were looking grim, a truly awesome B52 strike of (always three) aircraft. As I went into one memorable LZ with 10 *Slicks*, our gunships were firing rockets and mini-guns underneath us just before we landed, while two Phantom F4s on one side and two Super Sabres on the other dropped everything they carried in one pass. Of course every M60 in the flight was going hard – that was a HOT LZ! This was pretty standard stuff for us. We worked in the Mekong Delta where it was always wet, always nasty and very often booby-trapped as well.

Our worst days were the ones where the troops were in contact and of course we couldn't leave until the games were over. This meant constant flying and to cap things off, an extraction at night under fire. One South Vietnamese company had been surrounded in a very tight LZ. It was just big enough for all my 10 *Slicks* if I landed right up at the trees, which I had to. It is not a pleasant feeling looking at the enemy in NVA uniform only a few yards away and everyone taking hits. We didn't leave any aircraft behind but I had to go back on my own to pick up some wounded a few minutes later. I lost my 'cherry' that day, having taken my first 'hit'. I was flying with Zork some time later when he lost his. He was not amused and blamed me for it – even if I was flying at the time, he was the aircraft captain. On another of those long days, I flew my longest day of 15 ½ hours – hot refuelling for the first 8 hours then a 20 minute 'break', some C-rations for lunch followed by the next long run and a long flight home well and truly after dark.

There was no question that we had a hot little war in 1968. Thirteen men of the 135th were killed, 23 wounded, 12 helicopters destroyed and another 22 shot down. In the first three months of 1969, there wasn't a day that went by without at least one aircraft being hit. For a while I was called 'magnet arse'. All of us had lucky escapes of one sort or another. Two Navy pilots (Rick Symons and Tom Supple) in a gunship were shot down late one day and had a running gunfight across a number of rice paddies. They were picked up by two more Aussies (Mick Perrott and Bob Kyle) in a hail of enemy fire – it could be seen coming from everywhere. One of our American pilots had been shot down three times before his 21st birthday. Two others couldn't work out how a bullet coming in from one side and exiting the other at head height had completely missed them (but there were no complaints either!). In May 1969, the pilots of LACM Noel Shipp's *Taipan* were shot. He was the door gunner and went to the ground firing all the way. No one survived. NAM 'Blue' St Clair received a serious head wound on another occasion but survived.

And so it went on, day after day. For respite, if that was what it was, we did 'hash and trash' missions – single aircraft on resupply to the outposts. We carried mostly ammunition, sometimes while the attacks were in progress. We wouldn't have been there otherwise I guess. It was on one of those days when SBLT Tony Heulin flew into power lines in very dirty weather and all on board were killed. Pro rata, our little group had a higher casualty rate than the Australian Army.

Without making too big a point of it, for the whole Vietnam campaign, with all of Navy's involvement – HMAS SYDNEY's many trips and the destroyers BRISBANE, DUCHESS, HOBART,

PERTH, VENDETTA and VAMPIRE on the 'gun line', the Clearance Divers and then us—the top awards were 9 Distinguished Service Crosses in total. The RAN HFV received eight of which four went to our group in 1968. Our HFV received any number of American and Vietnamese awards and none were of the 'being there' sort either. That doesn't count the US Air Medal – instituted in WW II for 25 hours in combat over enemy territory, usually in a bomber – in Vietnam we clocked them up at a fast and furious rate. Most of us have a dozen or so we are proud to wear though we all reckon we have been short changed if our 1200 or so hours are anything to go by. Our grateful government took until 2002 to decide to let us wear them!

So how did it all end? Well for some it hasn't. I went to a reunion in 2002 and was appalled to see the condition of some of my friends – some were still fighting the war. Some had sadly lost and weren't with us any more. The rest of us hadn't changed a bit, or so we told each other.

Some things have definitely changed though. I do a little Reserve time these days and I am heartened to see that the Navy is a far more caring organisation than the one I once knew. It is far better organised operationally, it tries to look after its people and our commanders are intimately involved. My homecoming was to a darkened QANTAS hangar at midnight and a bus to take me away unseen. No one would dare even think about doing that to us today.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: CMDR Max Speedy, DSC, RANR joined the RAN as a Midshipman in 1962 at HMAS CERBERUS for initial training before completing his Observer Course at Malta with the RN. Following Wessex Anti-submarine tours and then a Sea Venom All Weather Night Fighter tour flying from HMAS MELBOURNE, he completed his Pilot's Course as Dux at Pt Cook and Best Pilot at Pearce, WA with the RAAF before his Vietnam posting. His decorations include the DSC, the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry and Bar and 12 US Air Medals.

After Vietnam, he completed the RAF Qualified Helicopter Instructor's Course and two years' exchange with the RN teaching pilots to fly helicopters. On return to Australia, he had postings to HT 723 Sqn Iroquois (as CO) and HS 817 Wessex 31B (as SP) interspersed with a bridge watchkeeping certificate on PAR-RAMATTA and as Equerry to HRH Prince Charles.

The inevitable Canberra posting to Naval Manpower Planning was preceded by the Army's Staff College course at Queenscliff. Life did improve with a posting as XO in HMAS VAMPIRE and later as Navy's first Defence Force Fellow to the ANU (for a study of Defence fuel needs). His last full-time posting was Deputy Director Naval Plans from which he departed in 1982.

With a multi-faceted career in Victorian local government over the next 20 or so years as a town planner and as a Mayor, he remains committed to the Senior Service having recently completed a number of project related tasks back at HMAS CERBERUS. The wheel has turned full circle it seems.

Editor's Note: Readers may wish to visit the Sea Power Centre's (SPC) website where they will find a page dedicated to the Navy's Helicopter Flight in Vietnam (HFV). Some interesting photos are included. The address is <http://www.navy.gov.au/spc/history/general/ranhfv.htm>

The SPC is also hosting the 2005 King-Hall Naval History Conference on 21-22 July at which CDRE David Farthing, DSC, RAN (Rtd) will present *The RAN and air mobile operations in Vietnam*. Further details can be obtained from the Conference Website (<http://www.navy.gov.au/spc/docs/khregistration2005.pdf>).

Published by: the RANR Professional Studies Program,
Office of Director General Reserves—Navy

