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THE RAN FLEET AIR ARM – ASHORE IN VIETNAM

On 30 April 1975, a North Vietnamese, Soviet supplied, T-54 tank smashed through the gates of the presidential palace in South Vietnam's capital, Saigon. This act symbolically brought 25 years of civil war and the existence of the Republic of Vietnam to an end.¹ Two years previously on 11 January 1973 the Governor-General of Australia had formally declared Australia's 10 year participation in the war over, following the withdrawal of the bulk of our military forces.²

The ubiquitous Bell UH1 Iroquois helicopter is still arguably the most instantly recognisable symbol of the Vietnam War. Images of the 'helicopter war' feature prominently in books, films and documentaries; indeed, a granite etched image of an Iroquois extracting troops forms the centrepiece of Australia's national Vietnam Memorial located on Anzac Parade in Canberra.³

Not so widely known though is the role that was played by personnel of the Royal Australian Navy's (RAN's) Fleet Air Arm (FAA), in a war that depended heavily on tactical air movement of combat troops, supplies and equipment in what were eventually called air-mobile operations.

On 14 July 1967, the Minister for Defence, Mr Allen Fairhall announced that eight RAN helicopter pilots and supporting staff would join a United States (US) Army helicopter unit in South Vietnam to provide support for allied forces, including the 1st Australian Task Force in Phuoc Tuy province.⁴ The new flight, designated the Royal Australian Navy Helicopter Flight Vietnam (RANHfV), was to be integrated with the US Army 135th Assault Helicopter Company (AHC) flying Iroquois helicopters in both the utility and gun-ship configurations. It was also announced that RAN FAA crews would supplement the Royal Australian Air Force's (RAAF's) 9 Squadron based at Vung Tau.

The first contingent of pilots, observers, naval aircrewmembers and support staff was assigned to 723 Squadron at Naval Air Station Nowra in July 1967, under the command of Lieutenant Commander N. Ralph, RAN. The flight consisted of eight pilots, four observers, four aircrewmembers, twenty-four technical sailors and six support staff (drawn variously from cooks, stewards, writers, medical staff and storemen).

Following an eight-week period of training the first contingent arrived in Vietnam on 16 October 1967 and was quickly integrated with the 330 personnel of the 135th AHC. The RAN members took their place in the 135th according to rank and seniority with Ralph as second-in-command as well as officer-in-charge of the RANHfV. As a result of this unique relationship between the RAN and the US Army, the unit was officially designated 'EMU', for Experimental Military Unit. This was fitting, given that the EMU is a native Australian bird, yet amusing at the same time because of the Emu's inability to fly. The unit later adopted the unofficial motto 'get the bloody job done',

which was to personify their attitude to air-mobile operations.

The 135th AHC was based at Vung Tau and comprised two troop lift platoons, each with eleven UH-1Ds, a gunship platoon with eight UH-1Cs, a maintenance platoon with a single UH-1D and a headquarters platoon. Six of the gunships were equipped with mini guns, rockets and machine guns. The remaining two were fitted with the XM-5 40mm grenade-launcher system, rockets and machine guns.



Helicopters approaching LZ

The role of 135th AHC was to provide tactical air movement of combat troops, supplies and equipment in air-mobile operations. This included augmentation of army medical services, search and rescue and the provision of a command and control aircraft capability. A typical day's flying would involve one UH1-H command and control helicopter, four UH1-C gunships and ten troop lift aircraft (the latter being known as 'slicks').

The mission would normally be advised the previous day along with the details of the ground element (usually a battalion) that the EMU would be supporting. The air mission commander would attend a joint briefing and provide advice relating to air movement of troops, use of gunships and fuel requirements, and at the same time receive information from the ground force commander on when and where troops were to be inserted.

The mission would begin early the following day with the launch of the command and control aircraft at least half an hour before the rest of the flight. The aircraft would proceed to the location of the battalion commander (usually a field location) where last minute details would be checked and pick-up zones (PZ) and landing zones (LZ) identified. Once identified, an artillery preparation would be fired into the perimeters of the LZ for a 15-minute period before the arrival of the main force.

The command and control aircraft would then direct the insertion from above the scene of action. The gunships were usually the first directed into the area to place further



Sea Power Centre – Australia
Department of Defence
CANBERRA ACT 2600
seapower.centre@defence.gov.au



'fire' around the LZ, and once the area was declared clear, the slicks would be ordered into a landing point marked by the command and control helicopter with smoke.

As the slicks entered the LZ they too added their own suppression fire using M60 machine guns on final approach. On landing, the suppression fire ceased and the troops would quickly disembark before the slicks took off and returned to the PZ for their next load. It would normally take about five lifts to move an entire battalion with each of the ten slicks carrying six South Vietnamese, US or Australian soldiers. On completion of the insertion of troops into their objective, the slicks would then return to a reaction site where they awaited further instructions. It was not long before EMU became fully operational, flying its first mission of this type on 3 November 1967. By the end of November the company had flown 3182 hours in support of the US Army 9th Infantry Division and the 1st Australian Task Force based at Nui Dat, Phuoc Tuy province.

Several major operations followed in support of a combined allied sweep against the 5th Viet Cong Division and it was during one of these operations that EMU helicopters were first hit by enemy fire. The first aircraft to be shot down was a gunship piloted by Lieutenant A.A. Casadio, RAN, on 19 November 1967. After being forced down during an attack on Viet Cong positions in the Rung Sat Special Zone near Saigon, the enemy immediately attacked the helicopter's crew. Despite their relative inexperience, control of the situation was maintained by setting up a defensive perimeter using the helicopter's door-mounted M60 machine guns. The crew was later rescued by another EMU helicopter, but not before they had successfully driven off an unknown number of Viet Cong, killing two of them. This was a far cry from the carrier-borne flight operations for which the naval aviators had initially been trained.

In December 1967, the 135th AHC was relocated to Camp Blackhorse five miles south of Xuan Loc, in Long Khanh province. In February 1968, the North Vietnamese launched the Tet offensive and Camp Blackhorse came under enemy attack by mortar. Skirmishes on the boundaries became frequent and the enemy mining of the road from Long Binh to Baria, via Xuan Loc disrupted supply convoys causing shortages of aircraft spare parts.

In response to the Tet offensive, operations intensified with EMU aircraft frequently coming under enemy fire and being forced down. The RANHFV suffered its first casualty during a mission to lift out troops of the 18th Army of the Republic of Vietnam near Xuan Loc when Lieutenant Commander P.J. Vickers, RAN, was fatally wounded while piloting the lead aircraft. He was to be the first of five naval aviators killed in action during the flight's four-year deployment to Vietnam.⁵

At the same time, the eight RAN pilots attached to 9 Squadron RAAF were also providing troop-lift capacity for the 1st Australian Task Force, and re-supplying troops in the field with food, ammunition, clean clothing and stores.

An equally important role was aerial fire support, and to give 9 Squadron a greater capacity for direct support of Army ground operations, specially modified UH-1H helicopters were introduced early in 1969. Dubbed 'Bushrangers', these heavily armed aircraft operated as a

light fire team of two, escorting slicks in combat assaults, providing suppression fire on enemy bunkers, and protecting medical evacuation aircraft. They also supported slicks that inserted and extracted Australian Special Air Service patrols in enemy occupied jungle areas. The RAN detachment to 9 Squadron played a significant part in enabling it to meet its army support role in Phuoc Tuy Province during 1968 and into 1969, until the last of its pilots returned home in May that year.

The RANHFV ceased operations on 8 June 1971. During its four-year deployment to Vietnam, over 200 RAN FAA personnel had rotated through the RANHFV in four contingents. Over this period they were continuously engaged in offensive operations, earning not only the pilots but also the maintenance and support staff of the flight, a reputation second to none.

The gallantry and distinguished service of RANHFV members was recognised by the award of three Member of the British Empire medals, eight Distinguished Service Crosses, five Distinguished Flying Crosses (DFCs), one British Empire Medal, twenty-four Mentions-in-Dispatches and numerous Vietnamese and US decorations. 723 Squadron, RANHFV's parent unit, was awarded the battle honour 'Vietnam 1967-71' on 22 December 1972. The eight-man detachment to 9 Squadron RAAF was also recognised with the award of a DFC and three Mentions-in-Dispatches.

The flexibility demonstrated by FAA personnel in Vietnam, in adapting to offensive helicopter operations in the field in both a joint and coalition force environment, is unique in RAN history. This is best summarised by Captain Andy Craig, RAN (Rtd.), who flew with both the EMU and the RAN detachment to 9 Squadron RAAF during his time in Vietnam:

"The 135th seriously practiced the business of 'getting the bloody job done' - risks were certainly taken but... I don't think the 135th ever missed a task in my time with it. The flying was hard and challenging and, without question, the most exciting of my career".⁶

The personnel of the FAA who flew with 9 Squadron and the 135th AHC in Vietnam remain a close knit group. In April 2002 the then Chief of the Defence Force, Admiral C.A. Barrie AC, RAN, unveiled a plaque in Bomaderry, NSW commemorating the service of the RANHFV and the 135th AHC. Reunion and remembrance ceremonies also took place in the US at Biloxi, Mississippi, on 25-26 May 2005 and at Fort Rucker, Alabama on 27 May 2005.⁷

¹ C.T. Kamps, Jr. *The History of the Vietnam War*, The Military Press, New York, 1988, p. 26.

² The only Australian combat troops remaining in Vietnam after the general withdrawal was a platoon guarding the Australian embassy in Saigon. This finally departed in June 1973.

³ For example, see *War Memorials in Australia*, Southwell-Keeley Partners [online], <http://www.skp.com.au/memorials/pages/00005.htm> (16 May 2005).

⁴ D. Fairfax, *Royal Australian Navy in Vietnam*, AGPS, Canberra, 1980, p.129.

⁵ The others were Lieutenant A.A. Casadio, RAN, Petty Officer O.C. Phillips, Leading Seaman N.E. Shipp, and Sub Lieutenant. A.J. Huelin, RAN.

⁶ S. Eather, *Get The Bloody Job Done*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1998, p.118.

⁷ See Naval Reunions, *Fleet Air Arm Association of Australia* [online], <http://www.faaaa.asn.au/news/reunions/> (16 May 2005).

