

# **A Unit Citation for the RAN Helicopter Flight Vietnam (1967 – 1971)**

## **Introduction**

This submission is made as one of a number of submissions by members of the RAN Helicopter Flight Vietnam (RANHFV) to the Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal (the Tribunal) and as best it can, follows the format that the Tribunal has adopted from Chief of Army's (CA) 2006 guidelines, and supports the proposal for a Meritorious Unit Citation for the RAN Helicopter Flight Vietnam 1967 – 1971.

In making this submission, the author supports the submissions made by other RANHFV members, particularly the leader of the 1<sup>st</sup> Contingent, (then) LCDR Neil Ralph DSC RAN, now retired in the rank of Rear Admiral and (then) LEUT Bob Ray MBE RAN, now retired as a Captain, a member of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Contingent. Other members of the RANHFV 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Contingents making submissions are similarly supported.

There are a number of differing viewpoints being offered in support of an award. All submitters however have the common belief that while a number of RANHFV members who were far more in harm's way and may have been appropriately recognised for those deeds: but it was the unremitting hard work, excellence and outstanding acts of gallantry and leadership by the un-sung majority that allowed the aircrew of the RANHFV and the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC generally to achieve its aims. It is those people to whom this proposal is directed.

It is expected that the Tribunal will take all submissions as additive to the proposal for an award and not to find points of difference in an effort to negate the work of the whole.

While the matter of the MUC has been around for some years, it is of very recent times that it has actually been referred to the Tribunal and given the reasonably short time to make submissions, we believe some information might not be available by the cut-off date of 16 June, 2017. As we do not expect the hearings to be held immediately after this date, it gives some time between then and now to finalise some matters. In particular, the OIC 4<sup>th</sup> Contingent ((then) LCDR Winston P. James DSC RAN) is overseas and though we expect him at the very least to support the work of the others representing the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Contingents, we hope the Tribunal will accept additional information from the 4<sup>th</sup> Contingent at the Hearings if it is not available beforehand. Whether he wishes to appear is not known but if his information can be presented in some form is requested.

## **Before the RANHFV**

I joined the RAN in 1962 and flew as an Observer in Wessex Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) helicopters and Sea Venom All Weather Night Fighters off the aircraft carrier HMAS MELBOURNE. I have about 1000 log book hours of these experiences.

In 1967, I became a pilot (RAAF 63 Course) and returned to the RAN Air Station at Nowra in 1968 to become a helicopter pilot in the Iroquois UH1-C as a first step before moving to the ASW Wessex 31A (817SQN) in May 1968 for operational flying in that aircraft.

An aircraft crash and fatality in June 1968 had me posted back to 723SQN Iroquois without warning to fill the second in command position of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Contingent RANHFV with LCDR G.R. Rohrsheim as its OIC. This contingent had in fact been formed many months earlier. My arrival began with the Battle Efficiency Course (3 weeks) at Canungra and until deployment in September 1968, the rest of the time was spent on exercises with 7RAR and flying with all the aircrew who formed the 2<sup>nd</sup> Contingent.

I was a comparatively senior Lieutenant with some six years' service but low helicopter in-command hours. Apart from LCDR Rohrsheim, the other pilots were Acting- or confirmed Sub Lieutenants, the Observers Lieutenants, and the Aircrewmen Able or Leading Seamen, all relatively experienced in the Service but none with any inkling of any sort of combat. All were provided with the comforts and security of ship and squadron hierarchy and even at sea, mostly a reasonably short working day and time to oneself, albeit long periods at sea.

### **The RANHFV, Contingents and Units vis-a-vis the “U” in the MUC**

The Tribunal in its report on the 547 Signal Troop's request for consideration for a MUC found that it (547SigTp) did qualify as a “unit”. While that may seem obvious, it is not necessarily so that the RANHFV is in fact a “unit” in the same sense that will allow the RANHFV to be awarded a Meritorious Unit Citation if it is not first seen to be a unit.

The current edition of the Oxford Dictionary (on-line version) for the word “contingent” includes “unit” as one of the words to define “contingent” and as synonym for “unit” uses “contingent”. In the same vein, the Macquarie Dictionary Thesaurus (on-line version) has for its third grouping on “contingent”, amongst many similar words, the linking of “unit” and “contingent” thus again giving the same meaning of “unit” to “contingent”. The Macquarie also uses the expression “the quota of troops provided”, and in the case of each of the four “contingents” of the RANHFV, this is exactly what it was.

That is, one word defines, and some others amplify, each other in the two Tribunal reference dictionaries: thus the four “contingents” of the RANHFV are “units” and all contingents of the RANHFV make up one whole for the purposes of this application and should be considered as one collective unit. The purpose and mission of the whole RANHFV 1967-1971 remained unchanged from its first to its last day in Vietnam so no contingent was materially different in its make-up, mission or any other manner, one from the other.

### **Republic of Vietnam Unit Citation, Gallantry Cross with Palm**

This Citation was awarded by the former Government of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) to specific military units that distinguished themselves in battle. The Governor-General has formally approved the awarding of the Citation to identified Australian military units in recognition of their service during the Vietnam War.

The RANHFV is one of those units awarded the Citation and the use of the word “unit” should not go unnoticed in this application.<sup>1</sup> As the above paragraph has come from the Honours and Awards web page, there should be no need for further discussion as to whether the RANHFV is or is not a “unit” for the purposes of this inquiry.

While the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam does have a specific citation (of words) to go with their Vietnam Citation, the other approved units do not have an Australian sanctioned set of words to date. Nevertheless, working from the US HQ Department of the Army’s approved citation for the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), General Orders No 8 (19 March, 1974),<sup>2</sup> and from which the RANHFV has been approved, the following extract is how the South Vietnamese Government of the day felt:

*...This dedicated and magnificent force was able to endure great sacrifices and overcome every difficulty while assisting the Vietnamese people in their struggle...*

And it goes on in even more glowing terms.

### **Command and Control**

Command of the RANHFV was vested in Commander Australian Forces Vietnam (COMAFV) (in Saigon). However, the RANHFV was, in fact and by its distance from higher Australian command, fully separate, physically in distance and by paucity of communications bereft of any form of effective operational **command** from any other Australian commander in Vietnam or Australia. Operational **control** was exercised by the US forces to whom we were attached, from the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC, to the 222<sup>nd</sup> or 214<sup>th</sup> Battalion, to the 12<sup>th</sup> Combat Aviation Group and finally the 1<sup>st</sup> Aviation Brigade on the aviation side. The direction of the aircraft in the immediate tactical sense on the battle ground was effected by the US Army’s 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division battalion commanders and the very many South Vietnamese battalions and other forces at whose direction and for whom we went into hostile and dangerous actions on a daily basis.

The OICs were not under any direct day-to-day oversight from COMAFV, albeit under his command. The Administrative Order to each OIC,<sup>3</sup> amongst some administrative and disciplinary detail stated that:

*Should you be allocated a task, which, in your opinion, is contrary to the provisions of this Directive, endangers the national interests of Australia, or is likely to imperil unduly your Flight you are to report the situation to COMAFV, having first informed the Commanding Officer of the Aviation Company to which you are attached of your intention. You are to establish safeguards to ensure that your aircraft and personnel do not violate the territory, territorial waters or airspace of countries bordering South Vietnam, nor to take part in operations near the Cambodian border.*

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<sup>1</sup> See the Australian Government Honours and Awards web site:  
<http://www.defence.gov.au/Medals/Foreign/RVCGPUC.asp>

<sup>2</sup> The document is probably web-searchable but in this case has come from Defence Honours and Awards via the Sea Power Centre, Canberra.

<sup>3</sup> CNS Minute Directive to OIC RANHFV Sep 1967

Of itself, a useful recourse to higher command should things become difficult but an impossible order to obey. As a co-pilot, for example with an American pilot in command of one aircraft, or as the aircraft captain in command of Americans in another aircraft, as Slick Leader of ten or even as the air mission commander in command of all the Slicks and Gunships, it was the battalion commander in the “back seat” of the C&C aircraft who directed where his troops in our aircraft were to be landed. Certainly there was discussion but in the long run, no one knew if the situation was “...likely to imperil...” until one got there and of course it was too late then to refer to the umpire.

On proximity to the Cambodian border, the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC operated right up to and on one or two occasions we ventured into that country. The motto for the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC – *Get the Bloody Job Done* - comes from just such a day when 1300+ troops of the South Vietnamese 44<sup>th</sup> Special Tactical Zone were extracted from one of the Seven Mountains on the border with and at the entry point of the Ho Chi Minh Trail between Cambodia and South Vietnam.

As for knowledge of the border itself, a line on a map did not mean a corresponding line on the ground. On this day (29JAN69), I was Slick Lead and if I was aware of the CNS directive, it would not have made any difference to the mission which was most successful. This “incursion” was under the command of the Army of the Republic of [South] Vietnam (ARVN) commander of the 44<sup>th</sup> STZ and his US adviser that day.

### **Rules of Engagement**

The CNS Directive had no specific instruction on Australian rules of engagement (ROE). Any potential war crime would most certainly have been prosecuted under Australian laws but all the CNS Directive had to say (Para 6) was:

*You are to confirm to with the Military Working Arrangements between the Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee and the Commander United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam. A copy of this arrangement will be issued separately.*

The RAAF and Australian Army<sup>4</sup> had quite specific ROE (and Australian commanders on scene to see they were observed) but these were not applied to us. As far as is known the Military Working Arrangements noted above were never made known to us.

As they are now understood (in 2017) the 1965 ROE for the US forces and by association, the RANHFV's, were:

*...the use of initiated fire provided the enemy target was clearly identified and was a threat to the safety of the helicopter and passengers.*

The 135<sup>th</sup> AHC, and so the RANHFV aircrew in it, acted so that any LZ likely to be hostile was “prepared” by artillery, air strike or our own gunships and Slicks' weapons on a regular basis.

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<sup>4</sup> I believe the Digger on patrol in the jungle even had a small card with his ROE as a reminder.

The RANHFV as a unit was therefore singularly and, one might say spectacularly, isolated from any command support in either a timely (immediate) sense for operations or for any administratively important matters such as ROE.

### **Other Differences**

If it is necessary to point out differences between the RANHFV and 9SQN, it is done to show the unique nature of the RANHFV. The most significant contrast is with the Department of Air directive that:

*The use of 9 Squadron's aircraft in airlift operation was to be limited to staging areas which were relatively secure, and free from expected enemy resistance.<sup>5</sup>*

As others have pointed out in their submissions to this Tribunal, there is a significant difference between the hours flown by RANHFV in all its years with the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC and that of 9SQN supporting the Australian Army at Nui Dat.

### **Command Support**

The living conditions and support given the RAAF are a case in point and relate to CA's 2006 issue of "Family Support" which in this case is meant to refer to higher Australian command support. Other support for our families at home will be covered separately later.

The RAAF lived in Vung Tau in what was known as the "Villa" and received living out allowances to do so. The RANHFV made this anomaly known but Navy refused to accept the point.

While at Blackhorse, tents in the mud (wet season) and dust (in the dry) were the RANHFV fare; toilets were more rudimentary than an Aussie country dunny and food was mostly C-Rations for the aircrew when they were absent flying. Off base leave was virtually impossible – Blackhorse was remote and the roads dangerous at best making either Vung Tau (Peter Badcoe Club) or Saigon impractical to get to (and not a particularly safe place anyway). When the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC moved to Bear Cat (closer but no easier access to Saigon) and later to Dong Tam (even more remote), any weekend leave which was never really practical became even less so.

### **Arriving in Vietnam and the US Army 135<sup>th</sup> Assault Helicopter Company (AHC)**

Many but by no means all, went to Vietnam by air, and like the RANHFV, arrived at Tan Son Nhut, in (then) Saigon. Waiting in a revetment most of the day and finally a C123 flight to Blackhorse, we were greeted by the 1<sup>st</sup> Contingent members many of whom departed the next day to Australia. The next day I drew flying gear and a personal weapon, test fired it, and then to have my first flight in the UH1-H Slick that was to be my stock-in-trade for the next 12 months. The following day, my second with the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC, I flew my first of many thousands of combat assaults. The other aircrew did similarly. My flying year was about 1250 hours, others in our contingent did similarly, and a couple did more. All the four Contingents' aviators flew well over 1100 hours. A synopsis provided by others obviates further detail from me.

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<sup>5</sup> C. Coulthard-Clark, *The RAAF in Vietnam*, p143, Note 44.

The change from peace and clean starched white uniforms to war and a pair of flying overalls took about three days and was to remain unchanged non-stop for a year.

### **The OIC RANHFV and XO 135<sup>th</sup> AHC<sup>6</sup>**

The Memorandum of Understanding between the US Army and the RAN amongst many things, placed each OIC of the Contingents in the Executive Officer role of the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC. During the one week leave during the commands of two Commanding Officers (MAJ Raetz 5NOV68 – 4 May69 and MAJ Woodmansee 4MAY69 – approx. NOV69), LCDR Rohrsheim was in command of the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC and all its American Officers and men. LCDR DD Farthing, OIC of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and LCDR WP James OIC of the 4<sup>th</sup> Contingent carried out similar roles – in command of the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC. Command of the Australians remained with the OICs and was not diminished by having to command the 300 or more Americans administratively at base or in the air in battle.

### **The 135<sup>th</sup> AHC Mission**

The US Army's assault helicopter mission requisites had only three people flying as Air Mission Commander; the CO, XO and Operations Officer. All the OICs of the four Contingents flew as the Air Mission Commander of the flight of ten Slicks carrying their 90 US Army or 100 ARVN soldiers, coordinating with the particular battalion commander whose troops were being put into battle, directing the gunships of the Taipan Gunship Platoon and coordinating air strikes and artillery for all the Landing Zones. Each flying day required 10 Slicks, 4 Gunships, the C&C and frequently a 16<sup>th</sup> spare aircraft when operating at some distance from base as we did frequently. Every day<sup>7</sup> commencing at around 0430 (at the aircraft) and not ending until each battalion commander could safely release the aircraft for return to home base, long days were the norm – a very short day of flying was (say) 5 hours, an average day 10 hours and anything up to 14 hours of flying not uncommon for all 15 or 16 aircraft of the Table of Equipment (TOE) allocation<sup>8</sup> of 31 aircraft.

From a 0600 take off with a few breaks and 14 hours of actual combat assaults, return to home base was frequently well after 2000. Given that 15 or 16 aircraft had been absent all day, the maintainers only had the 2000 – 0430 period for repairs; bullet holes, minor servicing, the 25 *hourly* (which could occur every second day at the 14 hrs/day flying rate) and so on.

The general rule was that the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC would fly for five, six or seven days on combat assault and then one day of direct combat support (DCS). All ten slicks and four gunships could be tasked for DCS anywhere to anyone resulting in single ship resupply operations that could be

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<sup>6</sup> LCDR Rohrsheim is in poor health and is unable to take part in these Tribunal deliberations so as 2-i-C, I will describe his role in the RANHFV and 135<sup>th</sup> AHC.

<sup>7</sup> With the exception of Christmas Day 1968, Easter Friday 1969, Tet 1969, and 21 July 1969 Moon Landing (the date in the Vietnam time zone) and possibly Thanksgiving Day, we flew every other of the 365 days in that year. The 1967-71 period of the RANHFV's involvement in the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC was similar.

<sup>8</sup> Numbers vary depending on which Contingent is discussed. In 1967, there were one or two more aircraft while in 1969 – 71, with some US force reductions taking place, the TOE for the 135<sup>th</sup> went down. In 1968/69 the TOE was 20 UH1-H Slicks in two Lift Platoons, the Command and Control aircraft (C&C), an Admin aircraft (usually the spare for the Flight) and the Maintenance Platoon's aircraft, then 8 UH1-C Gunships in the Taipan Gunship Platoon, 31 aircraft in all.

far more dangerous than standard combat assault, having no safety in numbers and going into places usually in dire straits.

Another requirement was that of Ready Reaction Force. After flying in support of the relevant infantry battalion for that day, the flight could be (and frequently was) sent to any number of remote locations actually or potentially under enemy threat. We would fly from Blackhorse to places as far as Tay Ninh City or Cu Chi well North West of Saigon to spend the night waiting for a call to resupply arms and ammunition or to combat assault a company of troops into a beleaguered outpost being overrun by the NVA. While the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC did many of these additional tasks, the next day was back to the standard mission – support of the infantry and no respite for the night spent on RRF. The 1<sup>st</sup> Contingent is well known for its work in and along the streets of Saigon at or below roof top level during Tet 1968 and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Contingent for its RRF in remote places.

Sometimes it was that one's home base (both Blackhorse and Bear Cat<sup>9</sup> on a number of occasions) was the target of concerted enemy action (as opposed to the regular desultory mortaring). Without warning, the whole of the Company's serviceable aircraft would be ordered to move out to a supposedly safer place regardless of the time, always with its mandated crew of four (two pilots, the crew chief and gunner). Whenever the threat eased, the aircraft would return and the next day's mission would take place as normal.

There were no enforced limits of flying hours. That we flew for 100, 120 or 140 hours in any 30 day period was noted and one did report to the hierarchy at these points, but the command response was that unless you called "chicken" you flew the next day. No one called foul or fowl!

### **The Other Pilots in the Contingents**

As was to be expected, all aviators had to be co-pilots for a period, the Navy pilots as much as the Americans fresh from Flight School. In general, the American system, given their Warrant Officer pilots had at most barely 150 hours total aviation experience on arrival in-country, had to do 300 hours as a co-pilot before they could be considered for aircraft captaincy. Without exception, the Australian pilots became captains around the 200 hours mark, a goal reached in about six or seven weeks.

The next step to become the Flight or Slick Lead of the 10 lift aircraft required a significant step up in flying skills. Not only was precise and very smooth flying required of your own heavily loaded aircraft (with no dynamic stability and no auto-pilot) but the remaining nine aircraft always had to be in a tight formation at the chosen LZ.<sup>10</sup> One did not go round for another go – ever. This author has led two company's flights of 10 each into LZs and taken part in an 80 aircraft assault (eight Company's aircraft). Other RANHFV pilots did the same. A more important point was that Slick Lead had to choose safe arrival and departure routes,

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<sup>9</sup> As just one example, 99 rounds of 82mm and 107mm rocket fire in six days (FEB69) into Bear Cat some of which straddled the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC mess hall and the NCOs billets. A number of soldiers in other units were killed and wounded.

<sup>10</sup> Some LZs were so small that they seemed to defy the numbers of aircraft wanted in there; the soldiers had to be on the ground as a group off running immediately and needed our covering fire to do so effectively.

flying under, around and sometimes over artillery fire to get from Pick-up Zone to Landing Zone and back again for the next load.

The most important requirement on the Leader when the inevitable “taking fire” or “going down” call came, was to react accurately in coordinating own fire, bringing the gunships to bear and taking the flight to a safer place. Lots of our aircraft were shot down: the Flight Leader coordinated the rescue of crew, with Medevac, resupply of weapons and ammunition being just relatively simple follow on tasks by comparison.

Very quickly all the Australian pilots became aircraft captains, some like myself became platoon leaders<sup>11</sup> and air mission commanders (being the nominal Operations Officer<sup>12</sup>). In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Contingent’s case, the OIC and I flew a disproportionate quota in the air mission commander role while the CO (the third person qualified) carried out other duties.

A considerable number of the Australians became gunship pilots, most were team leaders (of two gunships) and some were Gunship Platoon Leader for periods. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Contingent, both SBLTs Supple and Symons distinguished themselves but so did the likes of SBLT Heulin and Leading Aircrewman Shipp (both KIA) and some – Rex, Hart, Ralph, Shepherd, St Clair (WIA) (to name just a few of the many well known to the Author) all distinguished themselves by their great skills in the air and on the ground.

### **Who did we support in 1968/69 and on?**

From its arrival in Vietnam and the integration of the RANHFV with it in October 1967, the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC had flown in support of the Australian Army at Nui Dat and other American army units. With the move to Blackhorse in late December 1967, the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC began to lose touch with the Australian Army and moved more to supporting US and ARVN units, notably on a few occasions, the 18<sup>th</sup> ARVN.

From when the 2<sup>nd</sup> Contingent arrived at Blackhorse in September 1968 until the move to Bear Cat in November 1968, there were just four or so Australian operations and some more US units supported but the majority was becoming ARVN units. With the move to Bear Cat, all operational contact with the Australians was severed and the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC’s area of operations moved into the Delta – anywhere to the western border with Cambodia, from the southern tip of South Vietnam to the very hot spots north of Saigon – War Zone C, the Cu Chi area and the Parrot’s Beak. Every day, very long transits to our first PZ/LZ became the norm and where we had once operated with US Army divisions (7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>), now it was exclusively the 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> ARVN and some other smaller ARVN groups.

Where the Australian and American army personnel were professional in every respect as soldiers, the South Vietnamese were not so committed. When the US 9<sup>th</sup> left operations in the Delta, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regulars and their Viet Cong counterparts had the

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<sup>11</sup> With the Platoon Leader’s job of leading aircraft into battle, came the personnel administration of the American pilots, crew chiefs and gunners. Their Efficiency Reports were crucial to their future and so required vast amounts of time.

<sup>12</sup> The Observers carried out the coordination of Company/ Battalion/Group mission planning as part of the Operations Room team.



measure of the South's soldiers. So when the LZs (and PZs as well) became "hot", it wasn't the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC that always came out of it unscathed.

It would be easy to recount the battles but it is more important to recount the effect on the necessary maintenance effort to ensure there were 15 or 16 aircraft ready to fly the next day. If there was one demand that was met, it was that the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC provided its quota of aircraft every day even when the supply chain faltered under the load of 3500 – 4200 hours per month flying rates and spares and aircraft resupply rates based on a global 1500 hour per month per company.

When at least one aircraft in the period between January to April 1969 came home every day with some battle damage, when February, 1969 was the "hottest" month the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC ever saw, the maintainers saw to it that there were 15 or 16 serviceable aircraft to fly every day.

### **The RANHFV Maintenance Personnel**

The simple reason that so many Australians, officers and sailors alike, were so good and stood out so much as leaders and role models in all their different specialisations is that the Australians, as one, saw themselves as a team, were very well trained, highly professional and all committed to a long term in the Navy and wanted to be seen that way. The American soldier, the majority of the Warrant Officer Pilots, and most of the other non-officer groups had been drafted into the war and for the most part knew they had but a short tour of duty. Not that they were not good at their jobs, they became good over time but they did not arrive in Vietnam as teams and they were for the most part novices in all their respective callings. Significantly one major difference between the Australians and the US Army personnel was that the RANHFV were reasonably senior long term professional officers and sailors (the maintainers most especially so) and all arrived as one group on the same day.<sup>13</sup> Practically every American that came to Vietnam was posted individually to a unit like the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC, knowing little, knowing no one, and hence, a stranger to the unit and more or less homeless.<sup>14</sup> This was a hard starting point. They adapted well but the Australians had the advantage and it was this that gave the RANHFV and its continuous professional approach and leadership in most things.

As CDRE Farthing (OIC 3<sup>rd</sup>) pointed out to the Tribunal in relation to the Merits Review of Andy Perry (6FEB17), an RAAF GPCAPT in COMAFV (1970) tried to claim to Farthing that by flying such a vast number of operational hours, his RANHFV pilots were becoming dangerous. On the contrary, the RANHFV pilots had not had and did not have an accident due to pilot error.

Not all the US Warrant Officer pilots became aircraft captains, as they simply could not assimilate the necessary combat flying skills. Many were good pilots but it was the skills of the aircraft captains (US and RAN) that prevented accidents. Being shot down was a somewhat common occurrence, but rarely was there a botched arrival to the ground that could be attributed to too many flying hours and concomitant pilot error.

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<sup>13</sup> The Americans loved calling us "Lifers".

<sup>14</sup> The first group of Americans in the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC out of Fort Hood in 1967 came as a team but were quickly changed out after about six months and from that point on with single person postings lost any "team" identity that the RANHFV contingents maintained throughout their association with the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC.

Another feature that came into focus in 1968/69, when there were the greatest number of US soldiers present (about 580,000 plus) was the training pipeline for the American pilots was strained to its limit.<sup>15</sup> There were around 130,000 men being conscripted per month at that time into the total US military machine, (not just Vietnam) so the calibre of the trained pilot suffered somewhat. This aspect may be the first only properly strategic element relevant to the MUC consideration as much of the argument to date has been tactical.

This strained training pipeline with inadequate numbers of competent personnel is borne out by the fact that the whole of the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC had to be withdrawn from the US invasion of Cambodia in May 1970. The Australian Government would not permit Australians to enter Cambodia. However with so many Australian aircraft captains in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Contingent and air mission commanders, and too few Americans qualified to take the slack on their own, the whole of the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC had to be withdrawn. The 135<sup>th</sup> AHC took up the slack elsewhere, in fact had to fly at a greater rate, to make up for the other AHCs engaged out of Vietnam. This could nearly be a strategic element of importance to this proposal.

### **Flying Rates and the Logistics Chain**

Throughout the four Contingents' time with the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC, the rate at which the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC received its aircraft spares, its new aircraft (after 2000 airframe hours), and so on, was determined by Pentagon policy: each AHC was only supported to the extent of 2700 hours in 1967 and in 1968/69, it became 1500 hours per company per month. The reduction was caused, it is believed, partly by fiscal issues and partly the winding down of US involvement and the "Vietnamisation" of the war. In any event the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC consistently flew from October 1967 through to 1971 at rates well over whatever the logistics mandate had been. From March to December 1968, the monthly rate was averaging over 2800 hours.<sup>16</sup>

In 1969, the monthly flying rate continued to rise (January – April especially) when the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC flew between 3,500 and 4,200 hours per month. In the 12 months to September 1969, the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC flew 35,000 hours and carried over 250,000 troops into combat.<sup>17</sup>

The trading of maintenance spares became a significant problem and so wide-spread that specific orders banning it were promulgated from 1<sup>st</sup> Aviation Brigade, not that it either stopped the trading nor did it elicit an increase in stores supply from America.

In response to the high flying rates, where most AHCs sent their aircraft to major repair facilities in Saigon or in our case to the ship CORPUS CHRISTI, our Australian maintenance sailors' skills allowed the 100 hour "intermediate" service that had been done away from base, rotor head balancing and blade tracking (delicate procedures) and other "deeper" servicing elements all to be done in house. This saved many days of aircraft unavailability, something other AHCs could not do.

This advanced servicing in house could have only occurred because of the superior training and extraordinary leadership of our maintainers. It was not just the Chief and Petty Officers

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<sup>15</sup> A specific reason for the creation of the RANHFV – to ease the strained US personnel situation.

<sup>16</sup> 1968 Annual Supplement History of the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC by 1LT Dennis M. Phillips US Army, copy held by author.

<sup>17</sup> The 135<sup>th</sup> AHC in the period Nov 67 – Sep 68 flew 30, 670 hours.

who were responsible, so too the Leading and Able Sailors were all bringing their superior training and leadership to bear on the whole enterprise. The US maintenance soldier arriving in Vietnam had probably been in the US Army for less than a year, had been given rudimentary training in specific skill sets and was necessarily supervised to the n<sup>th</sup> degree by much older and more experienced soldiers. But these US supervisors were few. It was because our maintainers of all ranks (AB – CPO) could carry out and were trained to carry out many unsupervised activities in a variety of skills that their US counterparts could not, which gave our people the leading edge in many if not most of the maintenance teams.

Despite the lead provided by the RANHFV maintainers, aircrew flew with many unserviceabilities, something that would never be tolerated in today's zero-risk environment. There were three types of unserviceability: very minor, a failed starting battery<sup>18</sup> or bullet holes in the skin for example; a "Red X", important such as one failed alternator (out of two); and worst the "Circle Red X", oil losses and the like, holes in a rotor blade and similar issues that could lead to a catastrophic failure. Even up to some of the significant and high-risk issues of the "Circle Red X", we flew the aircraft if it made the requirement for that day and to get home was better than leaving an aircraft behind.

Again, our RANHFV maintainers were invaluable. In Australia it would not even be considered that a maintainer should carry out work that he had not been trained for. In Vietnam, it was standard procedure that where possible, a downed aircraft would be repaired *in situ* before the Chinooks were called in to lift an aircraft home. A maintenance team would man the two M60 machine guns in their aircraft, fly to the downed aircraft (which was not always secure from the enemy) and sometimes under the most extreme of conditions would effect a fix good enough to get the aircraft back into the flight of ten. It is for this reason that the recent *Gunners Badge* was implemented to recognise that some had gone yet another step further.<sup>19</sup> This badge does not however impact on the role of the far greater majority who carried out tasks for which they had never been trained nor been expected to have carried out in Australia but who did so willingly in pursuit of a greater objective in many a hostile place in Vietnam.

Even when the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC was reduced to 17 of our 23 Slick aircraft (because the supply chain could not keep up with our attrition rate), we still made the numbers to fly the necessary company lift of troops into battle. All significantly to the credit of the professionalism and skills of the Australian maintainers who led so much of the maintenance effort.

### **Non-maintainer RANHFV Personnel**

Each of the four Contingents also had a Cook, a Writer (Supply Rating), a Photographer, and Sick Berth Attendant (SBA). The first Contingent had one Safety Equipment person but the scheme of complement was changed and he was replaced by another maintainer in subsequent contingents.

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<sup>18</sup> Batteries which started the aircraft and were critical to quick starts in the field frequently failed. The response was that we swapped batteries to get started and returned the favour to the landing aircraft.

<sup>19</sup> Of the 40 Gunners Badges awarded to personnel of the 200 strong RANHFV and another nine to 2RAR soldiers, many more could have been given had it been possible to show more conclusively that they had also flown in that role.

A separate submission is being presented to the Tribunal by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Contingent's Leading SBA (Alan Hutchings). As was known to the OIC LCDR Rohrsheim, that person performed magnificently during the Second Tet offensive while he was attached to the major hospital at Long Binh.

Of the other ratings, all performed their specific specialisations well. The Cooks for example transformed the camp kitchen and chow hall from a very lacklustre affair into not quite a restaurant but as close as we were ever to get in Vietnam on American tinned food, eggs (preserved in ether) and precious little fresh anything. Our Cook Nolan<sup>20</sup> made a point of close relationships with the cooks and supply people on HMAS SYDNEY and whenever that ship came to Vung Tau, the OIC always had an aircraft to spare to bring back what had been provided. The US CO 135<sup>th</sup> AHC wholeheartedly supported our missions as all benefitted – American and Australian. The 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Contingent even managed to have proper BBQs with Australian steaks which became a feature of their deployments.<sup>21</sup>

The photographers in each group as can be seen in most of the Australian War Memorial's collection of RANHFV photographs, created a rare and invaluable record of the RANHFV and the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC in action. They came out with us on combat assaults, manning a M60 with their cameras ready.

### **Chief of Army's 2006 Guidelines**

One of the points in CA's 2006 guidelines adopted by the Tribunal cannot ever really be accurately applied to a unit seeking a MUC: it is that of having strategic influence. Strategy in this day and age is confined to the headquarters of national operations' command centres if it rests anywhere below the narrow halls of power in national security councils and the like. In 2006, the Australian Defence Forces were involved in Iraq and Afghanistan where approvals for most if not all of the activities of each Australian force element's undertaking will have been carefully developed and given legal oversight and sanction. The SAS operating in Iraq cutting lines of retreat or in the heights of the Tora Bora mountains supporting US forces were all tactical events in a much larger strategic picture of destroying the Taliban or al Qaida. They were important but they were not strategic matters.

Any strategic event in Vietnam was confined solely to the likes of US President Nixon stopping or restarting the bombing of North Vietnam or to the Australian Government supplying or withdrawing its forces. Nothing any Australian unit did in Vietnam, including D Coy 6RAR at Long Tan, was of strategic influence. Tactical events occurred and did influence day to day matters; but Strategic events, no.

As the Tribunal investigating 547 Signal Troop found:

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<sup>20</sup> As recounted in *Flying Stations, A Story of Australian Naval Aviation*, Allen & Unwin, 1998, p191, "The Company mess hall was judged the best in the [214<sup>th</sup>] battalion and this showed great dedication to the task by the RANHFV's Cook Nolan."

<sup>21</sup> Napoleon Bonaparte at least knew that his army marched on its stomach.

*Operations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will be conducted under the scrutiny of multiple information gathering media. This information will be available to the Australian public almost instantly. The consequences of actions are profound.*

*It would be difficult for many units serving in the First or Second World Wars or even Vietnam, to satisfy this aspect of the criteria.*

## **Mission and Personnel Achievement**

The scene for these command and leadership achievements was set by the 1<sup>st</sup> Contingent and maintained by the next three. For close to four and a half years under the most trying of personal living and working conditions and under any number of close and fiercely hostile battles, all members of the RANHFV achieved well beyond what had been stated in the very basic of instructions given them in early 1967 – to integrate with an American Combat Assault Helicopter Company.

The RANHFV went well beyond the bland directive issued by CNS. Expectations prior to deployment were that RANHFV pilots would not fly in command. They were American aircraft and American pilots were expected to be in command as the CNS Directive to the OICs and the US/AUST MOU infers. Most critically, as rules for the rate for gallantry awards point out, as well as only being able to count one-third of flying hours as combat,<sup>22</sup> they were to be halved because American pilots were presumably present and in command. Not only were the RANHFV in command, they were so much so that the anticipated mission for the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC had to be changed from Cambodia to elsewhere because there were too many RANHFV pilots in command.

## **Force Preservation**

In the sense that this aspect relates to a tactical level as opposed to grand strategy, then on every occasion that the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC went into an LZ, not once was anyone left behind, not once was there a death of an airman where his body was not recovered and in most cases, where the aircraft had not burnt (and frequently they did), were they not recovered as well.

Any number of particular events stand out in respect of 2<sup>nd</sup> Contingent and there are more for the other Contingents. It is not the place here to recount particular events but the tribunal can find exhaustive detail in the RANHFV's history, "*A Bloody Job Well Done, the History of the RAN Helicopter Flight Vietnam, 1967 – 1971*".

## **Personnel Performance**

Had it not been for the superior leadership of all the RANHFV, not just the OICs, but all the officers and sailors, there would have been no successful integration of our efforts into so many of the US and ARVN spheres of influence. We were quite quickly seen to be good at our jobs and the authority that came with those skills was acknowledged by the Americans and South Vietnamese at all levels.

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<sup>22</sup> As has been pointed out to another DHAAT tribunal (7FEB17), of the 1250 hours of this author, well over 900 were in combat and most of those were in command – all other RANHFV pilots did the same or more.

The Observers carried out aviation operations officer's positions all the way from Company, through Battalion to 12<sup>th</sup> Combat Aviation Group and is another facet of RANHFV adaptability. That a number of other Observers could move into the operations roles of soldiers in company and battalion groups in the US and ARVN (on-the-ground) systems speaks even more loudly. The testimony of LEUT Wynberg is particularly valid.

These individual efforts came from the support the OICs gave first to their men by leading by example – once that was in place and morale kept high by appropriate support, the junior officers and all the sailors made their individual contributions. To a man, none had ever had any formal military (i.e. soldiering) instruction or indoctrination but all were acknowledged as superior in their roles – LEUT David Cronin (with 18<sup>th</sup> ARVN and others), LEUT Bob Ray (at 12<sup>th</sup> Group and others) to name two of whom this author is personally aware.

LEUT Wayne Kimpton of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Contingent is well remembered for his reticulated hot water and sewerage projects. Both were so far from combat requirements but of such personal morale significance that higher command could never quite get over how important they became. Kimpton's commendation for an MBE had been recommended by COMAFV but it was summarily dismissed by the Secretary to CNS (not by CNS, as it seems to be in the correspondence) on the basis that the RANHFV had enough awards.

The case of LEUT Andy Craig (2<sup>nd</sup> Contingent) is similar. His MID was foregone in favour of SBLT Kyle. Kyle more than deserved an award but Craig similarly had performed well with both the RANHFV and 9SQN. The RAAF were even requested to support it from their stock but chose not to.

### **Ticking the “Other” Boxes**

If one thing stood out, it was the isolation of the RANHFV from anything Australian. There were of course, no phones and the only communication with the “real” world was the letter – parcels were only for Christmas. In general terms, a letter to or from family and loved ones took about 10 – 14 days for the one way trip. Given then about a month for two way discussion of any sort, the needs of children for schooling, money and medical/health issues could not be the joint family matter that we take for granted in any of today's Australian services no matter where one of the partners might be.

The fact that it seems to have been a matter that did not affect the performance of the RANHFV bears testament to the OICs and those who carried out their Divisional Officer (aka Welfare Officer in-place) duties. The Observers were DO for the Aircrewmen and while the senior ratings had some DO duties, the Observers filled out in these roles as well.

Family Support Services were non-existent in the 1960s except for the Chaplains<sup>23</sup> so again the tasks of assisting where some family matter that did need an RANHFV member to go home,

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<sup>23</sup> There were two or three Chaplains at the Air Station Nowra where some of the wives and family were still allowed to retain married quarters and possibly one at HMAS PENGUIN, the administrative base for all RANHFV personnel. Posting to the RANHFV meant a posting away from Nowra to PENGUIN without a removal entitlement, and with the concomitant loss of married quarters for the wives once the term of the occupancy ran out. While this latter situation did change in late 1968 – early 1969, the only family support service available to the families of the RANHFV were the circle of the other wives who weren't RANHFV “widows”.

these things happened first and foremost because the OIC started the process. Such family support as there was began at the RANHFV as is noted under Command Support above.

### **Naval Board Commendations**

There were a number of Naval Board Commendations issued for (not necessarily to) members of the RANHFV. This was a most unsatisfactory acknowledgement and quite impersonal. For the most part, the commendations were sent not to the recipient but to the Commanding Officer of the Naval Air Station at Nowra (where the bureaucracy finally caught up with them) and were read out at Divisions.

In the case of LEUT David Cronin (1<sup>st</sup> Contingent) whose work with the 18<sup>th</sup> ARVN was of immense value not just to the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC but also to the 18<sup>th</sup> ARVN themselves, his commendation from the US Army Colonel G3 Advisor to 18<sup>th</sup> ARVN was most glowing in its terms. The American commendation upon which the Navy Board Commendation was ultimately based reads in part:

*His ability to maintain a close and effective working relationship with Vietnamese staff officers even under the most confused and frustrating circumstances, marked him as an officer of exceptional personal qualifications. His professional knowledge was recognized by all with whom he came in contact, with the result that his service was actively sought by both American and Vietnamese commanders and staff officers.*

The eventual Naval Board Commendation reads:

*The Naval Board commends Lieutenant David Alan Cronin RAN for the efficient execution of his duties whilst serving with the RAN helicopter Flight in Vietnam.*

*By his perseverance, patience and ability as Air Liaison Officer with the 18<sup>th</sup> Division, ARVN [sic] he contributed to the success of air mobile operations.*

A Navy Board Commendation for LEUT G Edgecombe reads in part:

*The Navy Board<sup>24</sup> commends you for the efficient execution of your duties. [Y]ou largely contributed to the success of that unit's airmobile operations.*

The other Navy Board Commendations are in a similar vein and as most members of the RANHFV agree, not worth the paper they were on. They neither reflected what had been done and in some cases they did not get into the hands of the person to whom they were about. They can hardly be counted as a personal honour let alone an acknowledgement from the navy hierarchy to the person named if the person does not receive the commendation.

Those Navy Board Commendations have no standing in value and cannot be equated or represented in any way to be the 1960s equivalent of the proposed Unit Citation in 2017.

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<sup>24</sup> The words "has much pleasure" after "Navy Board..." were not included from the original draft as clearly the Navy Board did not have much pleasure as one of its attributes.

## Medals versus the MUC

Two Tribunals have stated that the RANHFV was the “most awarded” unit. The Valour Inquiry (2011) and the Merits Review (FEB 2017) repeating the Valour Inquiry, have insisted that the RANHFV has had more than its fair share of awards. The premise is based on the quota rates applied at the time and RANHFV did get many awards. The contention by this author is first that given the actual hours flown in combat, most especially the actions the RANHFV aircrew (of all ranks) who were involved and by comparison to the operating conditions, many acts of the RANHFV’s heroism and bravery went unrecognised because of the quota.

The acts of heroism and gallantry occurred but the quota and of too many awards demeaning the system, meant that from top to bottom, many acts of heroism, and of selfless service above and beyond the call of duty, even just cheerfully carrying out ones duties as was many the case for Fleet personnel,<sup>25</sup> would not be recognised. Consequently, to make applications that had no support at any level were seen as useless exercises and a cause of discontent.

Additionally, it has been stated that even in comparison to the broader Navy for that period, the RANHFV did particularly well. This is not agreed. All the awards to the rest of the RAN during the Vietnam War (the RAN CDTs excepted) were almost exclusively for non-combat related events (albeit the ship may have been in a declared zone – the relatively safe waters off Vietnam).<sup>26</sup>

As the matter is expected to be raised again for this hearing, I wish to point out that the (mainly) aircrew who were awarded the bulk of the medals are not the ones who are seeking any recognition from this Tribunal’s deliberations into an award. All the proposals being put to the DHAAT are for the largely unsung other members of the RANHFV.

In an undertaking such as this – to achieve the honour for the RANHFV of a Meritorious Unit Citation or possibly the Unit Citation for Gallantry – it is expected that the Tribunal will exhibit some careful scrutiny to the claims being made. The Fleet Air Arm’s Museum had published in 1998, a comprehensive history of the FAA from its earliest beginnings and which included of course the Vietnam War. As it was written many years prior to any serious consideration of these matters, it is at least free of any medallic bias.

This concluding paragraph about the RANHFV and its four and a half years in Vietnam’s jungles and nipa palm war zones is the best résumé of the merit that the RANHFV deserves. It comes from *Flying Stations*, p199 referred to above (Footnote 20).

*In terms of aircrew performance, this narrative of operational events speaks for itself. Over the period October 1967 to June 1971 RAN pilots collectively averaged 964 hours per month, or about 120 hours per month per individual. Aircrewmen probably worked more hours. While this effort raised questions of flight safety, it was also a measure of the degree of support that infantry soldiers required. Moreover the associated risks were managed because of a professional awareness that they existed. **Because of their***

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<sup>25</sup> Practically all 18 MIDs to Fleet personnel were for “...cheerfully carrying out ...” so-and-so’s duties (as referenced in Fn 26 below.

<sup>26</sup> Submission by Author to DHAAT Merits Review of Perrott and Kyle, Canberra, 7 FEB 2017, qv.



*greater experience generally, RAN aviators provided the EMUs [sic] with a full measure of leadership in combat operations and demonstrated a successful blend of courage and professionalism. The situation which resulted in valour awards for some were shared by all and, as always happens in war, many outstanding performances were not recognised.* (Author's emphasis)

### **The Ordinary versus the Extraordinary**

The Unit Citation for Gallantry has as its prerequisite the need to show that extraordinary gallantry has occurred. There is no specification that everyone in the unit has to do something extraordinary on one or more occasions or that everyone at all times must be extraordinarily gallant. It would of course be reasonable to expect that a significant number of the unit's personnel had at one time or another displayed or been involved in some extraordinarily gallant matter. Just how many is moot and the Regulations do not define where "extraordinary" and "gallant" stand in the pantheon.

The Star of Courage requires "great heroism or conspicuous gallantry". The Medal for Gallantry requires "gallantry in hazardous circumstances" probably only once and similarly for the Star of Courage. The Distinguished Service Cross, stated as reserved principally for officers, requires "distinguished command leadership in combat" and possibly only the once will suffice. None of these awards specifies any comparison with the ordinary.

The Unit Commendation for Gallantry however does expect a comparison with the ordinary so that the extraordinary can be shown – just what degree of *extra-* is entailed is not determined but it is not a comparison to the Star, Medal or Cross; it is its difference from the ordinary.

The Collins English Dictionary describes **Ordinary** as of *common or established type or occurrence; being familiar or every day or unexceptional, uninteresting or commonplace*. On the other hand **Extraordinary** is *very unusual, remarkable or surprising, not in an established manner, course or order*: the prefix *extra-* being more than what is usual or expected, something additional. For **Gallantry** the description is for *courageous behaviour especially in battle* but this does not specifically limit the definition to **only** battle situations. Synonyms for "gallantry" are "heroism", "self-reliance", "fearlessness", "boldness", this last three not necessarily actual combat "looking-the-enemy-in-the-eye" situations.

To the members of the Navy's Helicopter Flight Vietnam, the ordinary was the routine they did in Australia. For the maintenance sailors, working specifically in their trade or category as they had since they joined the Navy, all these men were expecting that they would be working in an American base alongside Americans carrying out their trades maintaining aircraft in a workshop of some sort and to be supervised as they always had been. Whether airframes, engines, radios, or armaments tradesmen, the ordinary had been at the Air Station at Nowra or on board ship with a secure environment and manuals and text books to guide them. Importantly, there were layers of superiors above them to supervise and check that what had been done was done properly.

The Sick Berth Attendants had general ward assistant skills with Nurses and Ward Masters and Doctors above them to direct and manage their limited workloads. For the most part, their duties were predominantly oriented to giving injections under supervision than much else.

The first two contingents at least, had a photographer who in Australia had only ever taken the PR photos of senior naval officers taking salutes on parades and the home-town snaps of sailors. Onboard HMAS MELBOURNE, they would take the cine film of the aircraft on catapult launch and later their recovery in case the film was required for an accident investigation – no accident and the film was usually consigned to the bin.

The sailors in the contingents trained in the Writer category, mostly Leading Seamen, had worked in Pay, Admin, or similar offices and been given the papers they had to type, payroll lists to correlate and similar mundane typing tasks with virtually no initiative required in any matter.

The Naval Airmen had mostly been responsible for the movement of aircraft to and from the hangar and flight line or flight deck; they did the refuelling as directed; mainly physical jobs under supervision again.

The Aircrewmembers were predominantly winch operators on the helicopters and did have significant responsibilities in that if an aircraft ditched, theirs was the task of winching the crashed aircrew from the water. Ashore they had a similar job when on search and rescue missions for the occasional lost soul in the bush around Nowra.

The Pilots in all the contingents numbered about 32, eight per group. Just what combat flying entailed, none of them knew. With the exception of (then) LCDR N. Ralph, RAN, the OIC of the 1<sup>st</sup> Contingent, who went on an advance tour to Vietnam some few weeks prior to the embarkation of his group, all pilots were anti-submarine trained (as was LCDR Ralph). For the most part that entailed hovering over a sonar ball out at sea while the Observers in the back searched for a submarine. Sixteen of those anti-submarine trained Observers would find their way to Vietnam as well.

Until they formed as their various contingents, the 1<sup>st</sup> and even the subsequent ones, no one had the faintest idea of the amount, the nature and the complete and total difference that flying in Vietnam entailed.

This was the “Ordinary” for all the personnel of the RANHFV. That it was a war zone was expected and that there would be dangers posed by the risks of enemy attack on the bases was to be expected also. But for the majority, the non-aviator RANHFV personnel, roughly 140 men, their new “ordinary” was still a relatively safe base within which, as was expected in the RAN/USA Agreement, they could carry out their trades and not have to go outside the wire to face the enemy in an actual combat role.

Broadly, as the numbers varied in the contingents, there were 64 aviators of a total 200 or so in the RANHFV. Many others flew as well: 40 Gunners’ Badges were awarded to record those who could be identified. Yet there were still more who flew and at the end of it all, well over half the total number and quite probably up to three-quarters of all the RANHFV personnel flew regularly on combat assault missions. If some of them did not fly on combat missions, then they drove trucks on convoy duties on very unsafe roads and then mounted guard duties on the berm for months at night after their day’s maintenance or driving was done.

The normal or ordinary for the RANHFV non-aviators in a war zone while they were with the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC at Vung Tau was in a relatively safe environment until late 1967 – Vung Tau was a VC rest and recreation area too. All in all, not a huge difference from Nowra or embarked on MELBOURNE until the move to Blackhorse and beyond after December 1967, nearly three months since arriving in Vietnam and another 42 months to go.

For the aviators, the expectation by the Navy was that the Australians would fly in American aircraft with an American in command – we would be co-pilots under American control.

While 9SQN RAAF flew huge numbers of Medevacs in their support of the 1ATF, there were few large combat assaults of Slicks<sup>27</sup> compared to the vastly greater number of single and two-ship operations delivering SAS patrols and extracting them after their particular patrol. The squadron flew 14,831 hours in 1970, averaging 1,236 hrs/mth over their 1966 – 1971 tour with 16 aircraft at about 80% serviceability most of the time. Crews and aircraft were based in Vung Tau and flew as rostered but returned to Vung Tau once a crew's flying for the day had been accomplished.

The 135<sup>th</sup> AHC flew monthly totals of around 3,500 to 4,200 hours per month for its entire 1967 – 1971 tour. Yearly totals were around 35,000 hours and 250,000 + troops lifted into and out of battle with hundreds of tonnes of cargoes of all sorts from real pigs and rice to desperately needed munitions and Medevacs for besieged Fire Support Bases and US and ARVN troops in the field. The month the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC was declared operational, NOV67, the Company flew 3,182 hours, carried 17,203 troops and had only one stand-down day that whole month. This was the standard that was followed for the next four years. (Report of Proceedings (ROP) for NOV 67, *q.v.*).

From the very beginning, Australians were placed in positions of leadership across the board. The OIC of each Contingent was the Company's XO as per RAN/USA agreement but the others were not far behind: LEUT WS Lowe became Maintenance Platoon Commander, LCDR PJ Vickers and LEUT BC Crawford became 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Slick Platoon Leaders with LEUT J Leake the Gunship Platoon Leader. Senior Sailors Homer and Brennan took charge in the Component Repair and Sheet Metal Workshops, Clark became the Aircraft Maintenance Leader. Ryan took charge in the Avionics Workshop and Bennett was the Technical Inspector. For his part Acting Leading Seaman Blackman moved into the 197<sup>th</sup> Medical Detachment in May 68.

It is not intended to repeat in similar detail the subsequent Contingents: their personnel followed the same pattern as above. The ROPs are provided and should be perused to confirm that if anything, the Australians became more deeply involved in the leadership of the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC throughout our four year association with the US Army.

LEUT AA Casadio converted to the new AH1-G Huey Cobra gunship and continued to fly in the *Taipan* gunship platoon until he and his crew were shot down and killed by an RPG. LEUT

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<sup>27</sup> OP OVERLORD in June 1970 appears to be the only time that 9SQN flew six- and eight-aircraft combat assaults with gunship support (similar to 135<sup>th</sup> AHC operations) rather than their normal single ship insertions of SAS patrols, their recovery and Medevac as required that had been the mainstay of their operations throughout their Vietnam experience.

Marum in the 4<sup>th</sup> Contingent did a Cobra conversion in another AHC as well and flew any number of operations with the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC.

LEUTs Godfrey and Battese were Flight Leaders. Importantly on the day six aircraft were shot down it was these two Australians who reorganised the return with reinforcements, rescued the downed aircrew and assisted with the 125 ARVN troops KIA and WIA who had been mauled in the two landings (18MAY68). On another occasion, LCDR Vickers as Air Mission Commander, directed a very “hot” and dangerous mission that lasted well into the night with the Australians to the fore in the LZ under fire picking up the ARVN stragglers. Vickers did not leave until he had conducted a searchlight sweep of the area to ensure no one had been left behind. He was recommended for the US Army DFC for Heroism 26JAN68.<sup>28</sup> LCDR Ralph for his part was involved in many actions as C&C (Air Mission Commander), the first of very many was 30JAN68 (See ROP for JAN68).

The day LEUT BC Crawford took 25 hits in his aircraft, another American, SP4 Gary Wetzel US Army, in another AHC, earned his Congressional Medal of Honor. They were in the same actions. As well as separately earning his DSC, Crawford was recommended for the US Air Medal with “V” device for heroism.

With the start of the TET offensive 31 JAN68, the whole of the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC was engaged in a fight the size of which no one could have foreseen. There had been US Army personnel who had departed the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC without replacement and the Australians were increasingly taking on more important tasks at all levels, not just the aviators. For example, the Photographer, LPHOT J Dawe, flew into Saigon on a number of occasions as the gunner of a Slick and was taking movies and photos at the same time while doing a combat assault into the Phu Tho race track in Saigon. (See AWM archives: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1126476> ).

While Dawe was taking his movies of Saigon behind an M60, others like LEUT Godfrey were flying along its streets below roof top level and having his crewmen throw CS gas and smoke grenades into the second and third storey building windows trying to flush out VC (ABJWD, pp60-61).

With the arrival of the UH1-H model Iroquois for 9 SQN RAAF, a number of their pilots came to have their conversion to type conducted by RANHFV pilots on combat assault missions, a fact not noted in either the RAAF Unit History Sheets or Coulthard-Clark’s *“The RAAF in Vietnam”*. The exchange ended when ostensibly the RAAF had learnt enough but some thought it was well outside the RAAF directive not to go into “hot” LZs (ABJWD, p61).

Of the Observers, all did some time in the Slicks for the vital experience it gave them but then went into the intelligence and operations worlds at battalion or higher levels. LEUT DA Cronin was INT OFFR and was very influential in the 18<sup>th</sup> ARVN Battalion nearby at Xuan Loc. LEUT Cronin has a submission to this Hearing and his statements are totally supported.

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<sup>28</sup> All commendations and associated correspondence that were known to the Author from the Sea Power Centre in 2007/08 are provided in electronic format on a USB for the Tribunal along with other documents noted at the end.

LEUT G Edgecombe became In-Charge of the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC OPS Office. LEUTs PJ Plunkett-Cole and RM Jones went to 222<sup>nd</sup> Battalion OPS and later to 214<sup>th</sup> Bn OPS (post-JAN68).

Petty Officer OC Phillips as well as flying in the gunships was a, if not the major driver in the setting up of the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC's move to and settling in at Blackhorse in 1967. He was assisted by a number of RANHFV sailors, LASE (Safety Equipment) A Winchcombe, LEMAW D Hardy and EMAW M Perkins to name some of those known to the Author. This three did carpentry and electrical work for the new (and bare) site. They travelled regularly over unsafe roads in convoys bringing building supplies for the new camp site. Winchcombe then went from his proper trade to becoming an Avionics Workshop expert for the remainder of his tour.

As with Winchcombe who became a Sergeant of the (Night) Guard, so most of the junior sailors under the guidance of other sailors at day's end would then carry out guard duty on the Blackhorse Berm – the 135<sup>th</sup> having a sector to guard every night. Being in the 135<sup>th</sup> was no eight-hour day. Our sailors led any number of guard duties which included Americans and Australians alike (ABJWD, pp134 *et seq*).

While the ROPs are instructive, they are very short on for anything other than some of the major flying events. All four Contingents' ROPs have the same bias; many but certainly not all of the big combat events rate a mention with little or nothing about anyone else.<sup>29</sup> Two sentences in the FEB67 ROP are possibly as close as any of the ROPs get to telling a more complete picture of the Australian influence in the whole of the 135<sup>th</sup> AHC:

*The unit has lost a number of personnel who have rotated to the US. This has created a number of vacancies and certain personnel of the RANHFV are moving into higher vacated billets.*

So while the Tribunal will be assessing the “extraordinary gallantry” required of any unit citation and its implied bias to gallantry in battle, it must not be forgotten that gallantry is not just confined to the count of enemy bodies. Gallantry can also be something that applies to a Scrub Nurse working in a trauma theatre for impossibly long days and nights without relief or a Cook who provides the best chow hall in the Battalion. Cook Nolan (2<sup>nd</sup>) made that accolade for two months and the 4<sup>th</sup> Contingent's Navy Cook for five out of six months.

That the sailors were involved in convoys outside Blackhorse and got caught up in the TET ground fighting is not mentioned. That the Sick Berth Attendants were working at significantly higher levels than had ever been expected; that the Photographers, the Writers and many others were flying as gunners all do not rate a mention. Similarly the crash of LEUTs Craig and Leake with two sailors as crewmen does not note that it was LAM(AE) K French who was able to assist the other crewman NAMAW K Wardle from the wreck and provide some cover for all while awaiting rescue.

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<sup>29</sup> The RANHFV ROPs are inconsistent in their detail. Some months show the number of aircraft hits and those shot down etc.; other months that are known for their activity report little or nothing and the text frequently does not marry with the weekly summary sheets. In contrast, the 9SQN Unit History Sheets (about 500 pages) not only list every sortie and the crews' names, but go into detail about enemy fire sometimes “thought” to have occurred, other times known enemy fire and then the individual bullet hits when they did occur.

Leading Aircrewman NE Shipp had already earned his Air Medal with “V” for Heroism in NOV68. He was undoubtedly extraordinarily gallant in battle when he continued to fire all the way to the ground when his gunship and all its crew were killed in a very intense battle on 31AUG69. But then so was Able Seaman JV Shaw on 16JAN71 possibly far more gallant when the relevant ROP states that he was being recommended for a US Silver Star following an amazing and extraordinarily gallant day and all night encounter with the enemy. The co-pilot and the other crewman in his aircraft received Silver Stars and the pilot a Posthumous DSC but Shaw never got a mention from the US Army nor proper recognition by the RAN.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Contingent, all pilots were aircraft captains, five of them became Air Mission Commanders (Rohrshiem, Speedy, Perrott, Rex, and Hart), at least two were Slick Platoon Commanders (Speedy and Perrott), one the Operations Officer (Speedy along with the Observers - Misfeld, Bayliss, Ray, and Wynberg); and two others, gunship pilots of great renown (Supple and Symons). The OIC (Rohrshiem) had three engine failures (and his only bullet hits while he was assessing Speedy for his Air Mission Commander role). The rest of us in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Contingent were shot down in total about a dozen times. Kyle counted 20 bullet hits on separate occasions and another 86 shrapnel holes from a near miss plus his two shoot-downs.

While the ROPs are very short on for anything other than the big aviation events and even there the detail is poor, we can state that for nearly 3 ¾ years (roughly 1,330 days), the aircrew spent most of those days in combat assaults, assisted by our non-aviators flying on 500 - 700 days.<sup>30</sup> Of those total days, we would have been shot at on every day.<sup>31</sup> From the ROP Weekly Summary Sheets, while the daily hours flown varied, the number of LZs which became PZs later per day is in the order of three to six going on the locations that are named. The facts are that as we “leap-frogged” the troops frequently and especially when conducting Eagle Flights, there could be anything up to 15 – 20 LZ/PZs in any day. So if only one in four or five LZ/PZ were “hot”, it is easy to see that one hot encounter per day is easy to accomplish.<sup>32</sup>

The Author was once tracked by a burst of 50Cal while minding my own business at 1500’ to begin a Direct Combat Support mission; taken 20 or so hits in my aircraft; mortared at least four times; and downed twice. Supple/Symons caught some 50Cal for real and so did a lot of the RANHFV aircrew, not just Supple and Symons. Kyle on 23 OCT68 was narrowly missed by an RPG that got Tom Supple’s aircraft who was picked up by ASLT Tony Heulin and Kyle rescued another crew that was shot down a few minutes later.<sup>33</sup>

All of us have so many close shaves that it is hard for the reality of the impact of full scale constant, every-day combat actions to be understood. We weren’t flying a day here and there and we were not co-pilots. Most of us flew on a one day in three basis, but when for example the Tet Offensives of 1968 and 1969 took place the flying rates went up to one day in two or

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<sup>30</sup> The hours known for two Aircrewmen, Brooks and J Ralph tallied about 1,400 hours each and McIntyre over 1,700 hours.

<sup>31</sup> In the months January to April, 1969 inclusive, there was not a day when one of the EMU aircraft did not return without some combat damage. Flying more frequently as Slick Lead and Air Mission Commander, the Author’s tally would be higher than most but see Hart (later) who states one in five of his LZs were opposed.

<sup>32</sup> With five killed and 25 wounded in the EMUs in 1968/69, a casualty was occurring about every tenth day.

<sup>33</sup> Kyle’s camera on the ledge above his instrument panel caught a bullet.

even flying every day when necessary. This is how on all Contingents, we achieved such high flying hours – 1,200 to 1,400 being the norm.

From documents the Author holds, some coming from the Sea Power Centre in 2007/08 and which informed the book *“A Bloody Job Well Done, The History of the Royal Australian Navy Helicopter Flight Vietnam, 1967 – 1971”*, (Eds Bob Ray and Max Speedy), the following from the citations listings is very relevant. The complete document set is provided in electronic format for the Tribunal separately, but the following is indicative of the whole:

1. From the Naval Staff Officer in COMAFV HQ, Saigon to the Secretary CNS (21JUL70): ***“Since July 1968, therefore we have been denying ourselves fifty percent of our awards entitlement.”***
2. Of the known RANHFV awards’ recommendations (some COMAFV supported):
  - a. Of two MIDs recommended (Clark and Howell), two Navy Board Commendations (NBC) resulted;
  - b. Of one MBE (Edgecombe) and a BEM (Ryan), two more NBCs;
  - c. An MBE (Kimpton) became an MID;
  - d. Another two BEMs (Muscio and Cole) resulted in MIDs;
  - e. Two DSCs (Perrott and Clark, possibly) became one MID and a DFC; and
  - f. One MID (Craig) became nothing.
3. Of recommendations for American awards that are known, two DFCs for Heroism (Ralph and Vickers) and an Air Medal for Heroism (with “V” device as they were described) (Crawford) are known to have made their way through higher American headquarters unscathed. These awards were not presented.
4. An even larger number of US awards had actually been approved and the medals provided (per AUSTFORCE signal 110759Z of JAN71) where he quotes:
  - A. ***US Awards. I have outstanding at this time one Silver Star, four Distinguished Flying Crosses, Several Bronze Stars, numerous Air and Aircrewmen’s medals<sup>34</sup> for Helicopter Flight...***
  - B. ***Vietnamese awards are made by the Field Commander on the spot. Several Crosses of Gallantry have been awarded to Helicopter Pilots. I have no paper work from JGS on these at all and therefore no official record.<sup>35</sup>***

The RANHFV ROPs do not indicate if recommendations for any Imperial awards had been made but there is just one reference to a US Silver Star for Naval Airman JV Shaw (JAN 70 ROP) which is still (2017) being sought. It is not known just how many other US awards were proposed. A number of RANHFV personnel claim that a US award had been lodged for them and some may very well be in the number that AUSTFORCE refers to above.

The various commanders of the HFV Contingents believed that their men were worthy of many an award for gallantry in combat. A number of commendations were made and as is shown,

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<sup>34</sup> It is not certain that there is this distinction that AUSTFORCE describes but possibly they are Air Medals with and without the “V” for heroism.

<sup>35</sup> As far as is known these US awards have never been presented. For the Vietnamese Crosses of Gallantry, there were at least 10 – 12 presented to 2<sup>nd</sup> Contingent personnel and some more to 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Contingent but the total numbers are not known accurately.

failed. Others could have been made and, but for the “quota,” seems ample evidence that extraordinary gallantry was going on and could not or would not be recognised by authorities higher up.

There is plenty of other evidence from written histories (Ray and Speedy’s *A Bloody Job Well Done*; Eather’s *Get the Bloody Job Done*; and Grey’s *Up Top*) and statements of those who have responded to the Author to justify the Tribunal’s support for a Unit Citation for Gallantry being richly deserved.

Documents which are provided in one form or another are as follow:

1. Reports of Proceedings (ROPs) from November 1967 to June 1971 (in electronic format by USB to Secretary DHAAT);
2. *A Bloody Job Well Done, The History of the Royal Australian Navy helicopter Flight Vietnam, 1967 – 1971*, Eds Bob Ray and Max Speedy, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed 2011. (Book) (Abbreviated – ABJWD);
3. Commendations and associated documents for RANHFV Personnel as held by the Sea Power Centre in 2007/08 (electronic copy by USB);
4. As an Appendix, Email messages (some with minor context clarifications) from:
  - a. Bill Barlow,
  - b. Brian Abraham,
  - c. Charles Rex,
  - d. John Dawe,
  - e. James Connolly,
  - f. Ray Godfrey,
  - g. Rick Symons,
  - h. Mike Perrott
  - i. Bob Kyle, (And on USB in Excel format),
  - j. Tom Supple
  - k. Terry Brooks,
  - l. Vic Battese, and
  - m. Jed Hart.



## **In Conclusion**

There were around 200 members of the RANHFV from 1967 to 1971. They went to Vietnam as officers and sailors used to the strict confines of their particular specialisations. Pilots hovered anti-submarine aircraft over a sonar ball while the Observers tracked real or imagined submarines; Aircrewmen operated the helicopter winch on “plane guard” duties as the fixed wing aircraft came and went from the carrier HMAS MELBOURNE. The maintainers carried out their trades on the aircraft under the watchful eyes of engineering officers. The Sick Berth Attendants with very limited responsibilities were under the professional supervision of medical officers. The Writers typed; the Cooks cooked; the Stewards waited at table and made the officers’ bunks; and the Photographers took happy snaps for home-town papers.

Not a single one of these people had ever fired a shot in anger. They were then sent as a group to join a foreign nation’s army to fight a very determined foe in the jungles and rice paddies of Vietnam at the peak of that war. The Navy gave virtually no support comparable to that given by the RAAF or Army: no rules of engagement particular to Australian law, no operational limits that could be effectively adhered to, no creature comforts, and adding insult to injury, even ousting our wives from married quarters back home leaving many with no support of any kind.

The fact that the whole of the RANHFV got a very bloody job done so well, speaks volumes. The Pilots consistently led more than they followed their American counterparts – as aircraft captains, as Slick Leaders, as Platoon Leaders of the Slicks and Gunships, as Air Mission Commanders. The Observers directed all manner of Company, Battalion and Group operational planning missions. The Aircrewmen became gunners of great distinction, some became Crew Chiefs with all the further maintenance that entailed after the day’s flying was over. All these people at one time or another carried out rescues of a downed crew, some spectacularly so. All distinguished themselves extraordinarily and with great gallantry.

Not only did the Cooks cook, they made the 135<sup>th</sup>’s chow hall the best in the battalion and then pulled guard duty on the berm. The Writers, Stewards and Cooks flew as M60 gunners at a time when the whole of the 135<sup>th</sup>’s resources were stretched to breaking point during the 1968 and 1969 Tet battles. One of our men, not only became a Crew Chief, but went on to pilot the aircraft he maintained from the captain’s seat on his last day in country! (Bernie Fisher in ABJWD, p383 *et seq.*) The Photographers manned the M60s so as to make a lasting record of huge value to our nation.

The RANHFV maintainers of all ranks became most respected team leaders who devised better ways to keep fifteen or more aircraft in the air every day. They flew as gunners out into unsecured places to make good repairs rather than have to aircraft hooked home. They devised and then carried out in-house deep maintenance routines that allowed our aircraft to stay in air the longer while logistics’ supplies faltered under the intense flying rates.

The SBAs moved up on their initiative from being scrub nurses to running the Bear Cat camp dispensary and then to assist in the trauma wards and at the operating tables doing serious life-saving work normally the preserve of specialist surgeons and doctors for days on end during Tet I (FEB68) and Tet II (FEB69 and on).

In every sense, the RANHFV performed far beyond just being praiseworthy, or laudable, or commendable, or some other meritorious-type synonym. All of the 200 members individually and the RANHFV as a whole, have displayed and been most courageous in battle, exhibited exceptional and extraordinary gallantry and done so with great skill and heroic dedication. These are all extraordinary acts of great gallantry and heroism and are far removed from the Navy's expectations of the ordinary and the RAN/USA Agreement that sent them all to Vietnam in the first case.

In early 1967, the Navy seems not to have expected much more than an experiment with the integration of its people into an American Army unit. As it turned out, the RANHFV led with extraordinary gallantry and courage from the start in 1967 to the very end in 1971. The result was that all four Contingents displayed extraordinary gallantry on all fronts – individually and as a group on dozens of occasions. With great skill and daring, all the RANHFV people as a most cohesive unit added mightily to the US Army's 135<sup>th</sup> Assault Helicopter Company and the accomplishment of a very difficult mission.

Now is the opportunity for Australia to recognise these extraordinary and outstanding performances.

Yours sincerely,

Max Speedy,

2iC, 2<sup>nd</sup> Contingent RANHFV, 1968/69

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29 September, 2017

**Appendix 1: Thirteen personal statements from RANHFV members.**

## **PETTY OFFICER AM(AE) BILL BARLOW**

I was assigned to the third contingent, arriving in Vietnam in September 1969.

Upon arrival I was informed that I would be working as a Technical Inspector (T I) for the Maintenance Section of the Assault Helicopter Company.

My duties included carrying out detailed inspections of all aircraft which were due routine maintenance and compiling a written list of all faults and battle damage to be repaired at that time.

I also re-inspected the aircraft upon completion of the repairs to ensure correct procedures had been adhered to, in accordance with the appropriate aircraft manuals. And as the Americans maintained their aircraft on a completely different system than that of the RAN it was a very steep learning curve for all of us. If a major component was changed or repaired i.e. an engine change, and a test flight was required, I would accompany the test pilot on the flight and in the case of an engine change, we would have to fit vibration sensors to various parts of the engine to record readings.

In the event of aircraft being shot down or forced landing due to enemy fire my job was to fly out with the Maintenance Officer and ascertain whether we could carry out repairs in the field or have the aircraft winched back to our base for repairs. This sometimes meant making decisions which did not please some of the pilots so I usually volunteered to fly back with them which gave them some moral support. It also could mean changing components such as tail rotors in a paddy field and being over your knees in dirty stinking mud. Once the replacement had been completed a tail rotor track was required and this was carried out by using the spare M60 barrel as a tracking guide. With the blades causing a spray of paddy water and mud it certainly taught you to keep your mouth closed, and wondering why no one wanted to sit next to you on the flight home.

During my tour I was also assigned to the night shift for 4 months. This had its own set of challenges like trying to get some sleep during the heat of the day plus while the day to day noise and activities of the camp were still going on around you.

Night shift was when minor repairs and servicing was carried out. As soon as the flight had returned for the day I had the company clerk make a list of all work necessary to meet our Battalions requirements for the following day. The list was then prioritised and assigned to personnel to carry out the work. After which I inspected the aircraft and where necessary organised test runs or, in extreme cases, test flights.

One of the biggest challenges for the night shift workers was the lack of light. Most work was completed on the 'flight line' and was either carried one handed while you held your 'dolphin' torch in the other, or a smaller torch was clamped between your teeth. Another was the mentality of the some night workers. They thought they could 'party' all day and then catch up on their sleep during the night duty. This we soon stamped out by introducing 'time card and reporting system'. But on the whole they were usually good, reliable workers who you could trust to complete any task.

Working conditions for the maintainers could only be described as very basic. If available we were able to place a few of the aircraft under covered canvas sheeting while repairs could be

performed but this was dependant on the number of aircraft to be worked on at any one time, so usually we worked in either dusty or wet conditions out in the tropical sun depending on the season of the year. The whole of the maintenance area was one large dust bowl in the dry season and a quagmire in the wet.

The Company was equipped with two models of the Iroquois. UH1-H was the larger transport, while the gunships were the UH1-C. The RAN was equipped with the UH1-B models. This resulted in a number of the Flight having experience on maintaining the power plant and airframe prior to being sent to Vietnam. All models used had the same engine, the Lycoming T53 L11 or T53 L13 for the transport aircraft. The consequence of this meant we very quickly settled into the servicing. We also had experience with all facets of the helicopter where the Americans who were more specialised in their knowledge so were restricted as to what they could accomplish. This resulted in many of our Naval Airman soon becoming supervisors and leaders in maintenance crews. A position their rank would never be able to accomplish in the Navy. Our day was basically broken into two. The day shift started as soon as the flight had left for the day (depending on departure time) and the night shift started around 6 pm.

Night shift was the most difficult and trying time for all concerned. Maintenance had to be carried out by torch light which meant you either worked one handed or with a small torch in your mouth or it was necessary to have two workers for the one job. And this was not always possible depending on the work load. And then there was the other problem of trying to sleep during the heat of the day while all of the noises associated with the day to day running of the base was going on around you. Night shift was there to assure that the number of aircraft for the next day's commitment would be available. As soon as they returned from the days flying all crew chiefs inspected the aircraft and make a note of any defect they had detected or reported by the pilots and these were recorded in the log book. This information was then transferred to work sheets and assigned to the appropriate personnel for attention and rectification. My job on night shift was to ensure all work had been carried out in accordance with the appropriate service manual, and then I had to organise any test runs or flights, if required, prior to assessing the aircraft serviceable once more. This was a very stressful part of the operation because on one hand I was mindful of ensuring the aircraft was safe to fly and also of Battalion requirements for the next day. The Company's full complement was 20 transport (or "slicks", as they were known) and 10 "gunships", but with battle damage plus routine maintenance these numbers were difficult to maintain.

Duties during the day were once more repairing battle damage plus carrying out periodic and routine maintenance to ensure that as many serviceable aircraft were available at any time. Also if any number of "ships" had been downed I was required to fly, with the Maintenance Officer and Maintenance ship, to the location and determine whether it was safe to fly back to base or carry out repairs in the field. Once more we were mindful of rocket attacks or enemy activity in the immediate vicinity, i.e. getting out as soon as possible, as well as crew and aircraft safety.

The American maintenance system was entirely different to the R A N. We had a "Flexible" servicing system where by routine inspections and component and systems checks were carried out on a flying hour or time basis and broken up so not all checks were carried out at the same time. The Americans on the other hand worked on flying hours only. I.e. 25, 50 or 100 hours flying time. This resulted in some aircraft being unserviceable for days on end (100 hour inspection) which placed great pressure on maintainers to work even quicker to get the a/c back on line. And at the same time we were pressured to keep as many of the flying aircraft in the

air. When we first arrived in the Company it was a very steep learning curve to adapt to the different systems.

Only a few days after I arrived I was required to fly down into the Delta where 5 slicks had been shot down or damaged in one way or another. Fortunately I still had an Australian by the name of Petty Officer Murray Herrmann from the 2nd contingent who had not returned home as yet and was “showing me the ropes”. By the time we arrived at the site each crew chief had compiled a detailed list of damage sustained and we went about trying to see how many of the aircraft we could fly home. Murray then said we could take a drive shaft out of one and place in another aircraft. This was completely foreign to me. The RAN was pedantic about all paper work being completed and thoroughly checked and signed for by all concerned before any flights could ever be contemplated. When I questioned Murray on the subject he laughed and remarked that we will do all of that when we get back to base. I think in all about 4 or 5 components were changed thus allowing us to fly 3 aircraft out while the remainder were winched out by recovery helicopters. I was in a state of panic wondering how I would cope when I was on my own. But we soon learnt that this was war and we had to deal with each situation as it came to hand. I do remember one day when we running an aircraft after major repairs had been carried out. I was under the cabin area checking for leaks when I experienced a sharp pain in both ears. This was even though I was wearing ear protection. I quickly looked out and saw a large cloud of dust and at the same time one of the helicopter which was parked in a revetment not 75 metres in front of us rocking violently. A mortar shell had landed just in front of the aircraft and had blown most of the nose away. As I started running for the shelter I was passed by the pilot. A short time later we did return to shut the aircraft down. Another unpleasant duty the 'flight' had to perform on occasions was to extract wounded and KIA soldiers after an enemy action. This resulted in the crew chief and maintenance crews having to hose out the cabin area of blood when they returned to base and even removed some floor panels so the smell of 'death' could be eliminated as much as possible.

W E Barlow  
X Petty Officer Air Mechanic (Airframes and Engines)

## **LEUT (PILOT) BRIAN ABRAHAM**

Can you assist with any of the following? How many times were you and the rest of your 4<sup>th</sup> Contingent pilots shot down?

Have no idea of my compatriots. Personally, 6 or 7 times, company records on three consecutive Sundays. Worse was an ambush in the LZ flying lead – far too many holes to count, one back seat hit in neck and back, fortunately flesh wounds, but when hit he accidentally shot two disembarking troops in the back. Not many of the troops survived the engagement. In retrospect feel really sorry for the lad because he was most concerned about having shot the troops. At the time I just told him “don’t worry about it, it’s war son, shit happens”. Often think how he is fairing now. Memory (poor thing) tells me the aircraft was written off, too many holes in structural panels. Photo [Not included] is of a round between the shoulder-blades once we got back to the PZ, always flew right seat personally. All aircraft managed to get out of the LZ, but had to be slung out of the PZ. Roadrunners (CH-47), land to your loads became the quip.

How many bullet hits did your aircraft take (assuming that you counted them)? Did you list the whole of your aircraft crew when you flew and if so do you have the names of any of the Australian aircrew? Not just the Aircrewmembers but the Cook, Writer, Photographer and Medic and others who were part of the Contingent and may have flown with you on occasion.

Unfortunately I only ever recorded the other front seaters, something I greatly regret, used to record the back seaters on the squadron. Used to have a USN patrol boat chap (Bob Clark, who is fully engaged with the EMU post war social fraternity, he will be at the reunion) come fly with me, and only me for some reason, on his days off from his USN duties. Jim Shaw's episode you will be familiar with, but I don't recall our troops doing much flying, once again I cite memory lapse in this regard.

I'm not aware that any of your team were WIA and I feel that may have occurred but I don't know to whom.

No Aussies suffered wounds, but US killed and wounded. Jim Gumley I think was the only one who had a physical outcome, a bit of back trouble following a hard landing in a gunship after an engine failure.

More than happy if it's only info about you, I will be trying to get to others in all the contingents for similar info.

One event that rankles is the loss of Noel Le Plante, aircraft, crew and complement of AVRN. I had just got back from R & R in Hong Kong where I met up with my better half. On this day Noel was #4 and I #5. Only four aircraft were needed for the job so I was detailed to the sun bathing brigade. Noel started complaining how his aircraft was under performing and I offered to take his place, but under no amount of persuasion would he decline. He was highly experienced, so thinking he knows what he's doing I left him to it. Reasons given for the accident were fatigue of a bolt in the head or some such, but I know in my gut that he overcooked a cyclic climb – chopped off tail boom. Wreckage was winched into the back of a Chinook and deposited at Vinh Long. Had landed flat on its skids in a normal attitude, about three feet high to top of cabin, interior changed from grey to blood red, remember picking small swatches of Nomex with flesh attached from the bolt heads in a two man compartment and pondering life.

## **SBLT (PILOT) CHARLIE REX**

My worst day ever was leading a flight of 10: lost 8 for one thing and another; shoot downs, mechanical failures and etc. and returned to the lines with 3 – no KIA's fortunately. Merc, I believe it was, lost one to some failure or the other, picked up a second helo and returned to the flight hence the lost 8 and return with three.

Four of my 32 bullet hits were in my windscreen immediately in front of my eyes after discharging some RVN troops in an LZ. Close examination on RTB revealed that the bullets came in from the right rear door and missed passing into the back of my head by not much.

As an aside, I still have the actual first bullet that 'took my cherry'. It (presumably) came through the right hand cargo door space (door opened) and entered the LH stanchion between the front and rear doors; was entangled in my crew chief's hammock which was stowed in one of those little compartments in the stanchion; and punched through the outer skin of the helo without going any further, still entangled in a bit of the hammock.

Charlie

## **LEADING AIRMAN PHOTOGRAPHER JOHN DAWE.**

I was standby for sea in July 1967 when I was informed I would be part of the Helo Flight. I must have been an afterthought because I didn't get the jungle/ weapons training that others of the flight went through.

On arrival I joined the Public Information Office of the 222<sup>nd</sup> Aviation Battalion and did photographic duties for us and the US Army.

In December I was part of a small team that was sent to an area within the camp known as Black Horse. We built accommodations for the rest of the company that was to follow shortly thereafter.

When we were operational, I went back to normal photographic PR work.

I was in Sydney waiting to catch a flight back after a week's R&R when TET broke out. I got an extra day as there was no contact with Saigon, and we finally left with no clear destination in Vietnam. We landed in Cam Rhan Bay & I spent the next few days hitch-hiking with anything that flew back to Blackhorse.

Within a few days I was asked if I'd taken enough PR photos, & would I like to volunteer to be a door gunner as things were very hectic & there was a shortage. I was given a 30 minute course in cleaning and operation of the M60 machine guns, and from then on I was responsible for the guns & ammo on each flight. I was fortunate in that I could choose which pilots I flew with, invariably I chose our Navy pilots as they seemed the ones with a better skill set. However this wasn't always possible and some of my hairiest times were with US warrant officer pilots. There were many occasions when in sheer terror I wondered what the hell an RAN photographer was doing sitting in the back of a US helicopter inserting a bunch of wide eyed Vietnamese soldiers into a rice paddy. And later, when we'd been detailed off for medivac, looking at the corpses on the floor. Prior to this I'd never seen a dead body, now I got anatomy lessons in spades.

I remember being part of a 100 ship assault near Can Tho. I think our ship was number 99...the turbulence was terrific we were on short finals into a LZ with 6 foot elephant grass.. I looked up to see a pair of napalm cylinders tumbling over us, I still wonder if the Phantom pilot had seen us...you could feel the heat from the strike, & it took some persuasion to get the Arvin troops to jump out.

I had a small bracket made on which I mounted my movie camera to the machine gun. I took some footage of an assault we made at the Phu Tho race track in Saigon during the early part of TET. It wasn't that successful as it was difficult to aim and fire and press the camera button at the same time.

I flew most days but occasionally I would go with our Medic to one of the villages if there was "something special" on. He was assisting a Caesarean operation with a Canadian doctor one day in this small concrete building with a generator outside blowing fumes thru a hole in the wall...certainly a first for me. Another time I went with some of our boys in a big truck, 30 miles through "Indian Country" to pick up gravel for our camp area....I was riding Shotgun & doing the hometown happy-snaps for the papers.

Some of my other duties involve Perimeter guard duties. We had one side of the Blackhorse to guard. As sergeant, I was in the watchtower and had bunkers on either side to control. In pitch darkness I did the rounds, checking the US troops inside the bunkers were awake...many times as I lifted the flap to go in the smell of marijuana drifted out, but hey, that's what it was...

I flew until August 20 1968. I was CQ on that night, my 23 birthday. I was sitting in the company office when word came in that we had lost a helo with Tony Casadio & Darky Phillips killed. I saw the boss and un-volunteered my services as a door gunner. We were "short".....going home soon & I wasn't going to push my luck. I became the tool van man;

issuing tools to the aircraft night crew. I did that until we came home in October. Navy life after that was difficult. Normal protocols were difficult to adjust to. Our experience was so alien to navy life. No one could understand what we had been through. The rule book had been discarded for one year and there was no going back with what we had seen & done. Without a doubt, what we had contributed to success of US operations was due to the RAN training we had. In our minds it was another job that had to be done, this wasn't the general US Army mindset, & within our company, created problems with the general US Army people we lived with. Most of them were drafted....we weren't...."how could you volunteer for this"? Well, I didn't, at least I did sign up for 12 years, but as a Navy PHOT .....That's life.

## **LEADING AIRMAN PHOTOGRAPHER JAMES CONNOLLY**

I was posted to the RANHFV 2<sup>nd</sup> flight as a Leading Airman Photographer. The officer in charge of the fleet photographic section at HMAS KUTTABUL in Sydney could not enlighten me as to the objective of my posting. At the fleet photographic section I mainly worked in public relations so although not confirmed, my Photographic Officer felt this could be my role with the RANHFV. This would be confirmed in due course when I joined the "flight" for pre-embarkation training. I knew that Leading Airman Photographer John Dawe was a member of the first flight but I had no contact with him.

Prior to embarking by air, the flight trained with the Army at and around HMAS ALBATROSS and at the Jungle Training Centre at Canungra, Queensland. I had been issued with a still and movie camera, so during the training of the flight I took every opportunity to take a pictorial record of the unit's training.

On arrival in Vietnam, at a meeting with the unit's Commanding Officer LCDR G Rohrsheim and my Divisional Officer LEUT RG Ray, they informed me they were none the wiser as to what my objective with the unit was. My thoughts were for public relations purposes to take a picture of each member, record any award ceremonies, take photographs of visits of dignitaries and Australian entertainers, and create a pictorial record of the unit for history. LCDR Rohrsheim agreed with this but could not see me fully employed for one year taking photographs of 50 personnel. I also felt I could with his permission, visit the RAN Clearance Diving Team 3 stationed in Vung Tau. LCDR Rohrsheim agreed with this; however, as I was a "spare hand" for most of the time I would not be taking photographs but I would be employed in a support position on other tasks.

I was assigned to drive trucks bringing ammunition and other supplies from Long Binh supply base into Blackhorse and Bear Cat where we were stationed, shifts as a Non Commissioned Officer on nightly patrol checking the sentry boxes on the perimeter "Berm", and last but not least, most of the time as a door gunner on the troop carrying "Slick" helicopters, realising whilst doing the latter my main task was manning the M60 machine gun to provide covering fire during insertions and extractions and I could not take still and movie pictures at this time, so on my non-flying days when I was not rostered I felt obliged to volunteer to fly as a passenger in troop carrying "Slicks" and "Gunship" helicopters to obtain action photographs to make a pictorial history of the RANHFV.



## LEUT (PILOT) RAY GODFREY

Shot down:

(Me) None: Crow [Bruce Crawford] at least twice: Daggers [Jeff Dalglish] once? Leake crashed with Andy Craig, Casa [AA Tony Casadio] twice: Staf [Stafford Low] none: [Neil] Ralph had engine failure: [Vic] Battese none: Pat [Vickers] None: Air crewmen and other door gunners [don't know] I am sure several did [PO Phillips with Casadio, Brooks with US gunship crew: French and Wardle with Craig/Leake].

18May68: I was White lead (2nd Vic [of 5 Slicks]); Crow [Crawford] may have been Yellow Lead. On landing in what was to be a cold LZ all hell broke loose I had a mortar land about six feet in front of me and virtually in between the Vics [Between the five aircraft in the first "V" and the second "V" tucked in behind]. Luckily the paddies were still muddy so the explosion was absorbed and my helo only got covered in mud. I yelled: "Let's get the Fuck out of here" and we all pulled pitch and left. A number of ARVNs were still on board most helos as they did not want to get off.

By the time I reached 1000 feet, I called for tell off as I had lost sight of Crow's Vic and my crew could not see any of my Vic. Next thing was my Crew Chief saying that at least two helos were down behind me. So I turned round and landed next to one and kicked out the ARVNs to look after the helo and recovered the crew, guns, radio, etc. By this time the other crews had either landed in a safe area or had been picked up.

I think it was Crow [Crawford] who landed inside an ARVN base, out of fuel due to hits in the tank.

I believe all 10 helos took hits some worse than others.

Me I had one hit in the gearbox. During the year I only took two hits. !!!!

We gathered all flyable helos back at the PZ and did repairs to what we could and waited for spares and relief helos to arrive from Blackhorse. We eventually got enough serviceable to allow us to put in another lift or two but a bit further away from the village and after some prep and gunship support on landing. I think most of the crews who did the first insertion took part in the next. I know Casa [Casadio] was the lead gunship.

The day before I flew with the Ops O to AN LOC for the brief and we were assured by the ARVN CO that there was no VC in the village.

Only listed P& CP [Pilot and Co-pilot] in log book as did most others. I did not fly with any RAN back seat though I did fly with 2 RAR members as door gunners [during Tet JAN/ FEB 68].

Flew with RAAF 5 SQN on their conversion and famil flights. Lil Mac [LS J McIntyre] flew 1700 hrs in 10 months before I grounded him.

I flew over 1300 hrs which included in country training.

I probably flew about 50% hot or supposedly hot LZs but who counted? Many of the H&Ts [Hash and Trash – properly Direct Combat Support] were worse.

Flew into Saigon during Tet and also mini-Tet that is when I did the teargas drops into a high rise.

Had a couple of unscheduled callouts when on stand down but they did not amount to much.

Lot more yarns but too much to put in here.

Keep well

Cheers Ball [Ray Godfrey]

## **LEUT (PILOT) TOM SUPPLE**

Hi Max, I think we need to move on but for the sake of your work and the citation I will cooperate one more time. I remember as a co-pilot in the first weeks after arrival being hit by an RPG while climbing out of a hot LZ. Crash landed in a bomb crater and picked up almost immediately by another chopper. My second one was significant by occurring on my 22nd birthday but I can't recall the details. I had an engine failure enroute to the delta and of course the incident with Rick. That is all I can recall and I was lucky enough to have good men around on each occasion to get me out of trouble.

## **LEUT (PILOT) RICK SYMONS**

Hi Max,

As well as the February incident with Tom, I had an engine failure on 15 June 1969. I recall it because the U.S. Army sent me a letter afterwards (which I enclose).<sup>36</sup>

See you both in October.

Cheers

Rick

## **LEUT (PILOT) MIKE PERROTT**

Regarding the unit citation; as my AC [Aircraft] was shot down twice; a catastrophic engine disintegration and transmission oil system shot away. My AC was also hit on 8 other occasions; single and multiple hits. All these hits were while flying with the flight. I also experienced two friend[ly] internal AD's [Accidental Discharges] as single AC; Rick Symons M16 through roof but missed the rotor and Mark Bryant who AD his .38 through the chopper floor. (I said 7 'other hits' on the phone but then remembered our AC was hit very early in country with Russo [8 total].

I hope this helps.

Sincerely, Mike

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<sup>36</sup> The letter of commendation from the Commanding Officer 222<sup>nd</sup> Combat Aviation Battalion notes an exceptional landing of a fully loaded Gunship in very difficult conditions '...undoubtedly resulted in your saving a valuable Army Aircraft and possible injury to your crew and yourself. ...What could have been a major accident was prevented by your skill and professionalism. I extend my personal thanks for a job "well done".'

## SBLT (PILOT) BOB KYLE

DATE	ACFT TYPE	ACFT NO.	PILOT	2ND PILOT/CREW	MISSION	REMARKS	HOURS FLOWN DAY	HOURS FLOWN NIGHT
23-Oct-68	UH-1H	290	SELF	1ST LT RUSSO	CA BEN TRE	HEAVY ENEMY FIRE. RPG NEAR MISS, BULLET HOLE IN WINDSCREEN, 1 PAX KILLED BY ROUND THROUGH NECK	6.55	
24-Oct-68	UH-1H	272	SELF	WO1 KNEEDLER	CA DONG TAM	1 HIT ROTOR HEAD	7.00	
5-Nov-68	UH-1H	136	SELF	WO1 ANDREWS	CA BEN TRE	1 HIT TAIL BOOM	5.00	
30-Nov-68	UH-1H	271	SELF	WO1 PAVLAK	DCS PHU CUONG	1 HIT SKID	6.35	
11-Dec-68	UH-1H	077	SELF	WO1 FOLEY	CA DONG TAM	1 HIT TAIL BOOM	8.10	
11-Dec-68	UH-1H	070	SELF	WO1 MATHERNE	CA DONG TAM	ENEMY FIRE CAUSED ENGINE FAILURE: EOL SUCCESSFUL.	1.50	0.30
12-Dec-68	UH-1H	522	SELF	WO1 FAIRCHILD	CA CAI LAI	2 HITS HYDRAULIC FAILURE	6.55	
17-Jan-69	UH-1H	968	SELF	WO1 DOBSON	CA TRA ON	BULLET DAMAGE TO TAIL BOOM	5.50	0.15
21-Jan-69	UH-1H	289	SELF	1ST LT BRYANT	DCS VI THANH SOC TRANG	BULLET DAMAGE TO TAIL BOOM	4.40	2.00
2-Feb-69	UH-1H	387	SELF	SBLT PERROTT	CA VINH LONG TRA VIN	RESCUE SUPPLE, SYMONS, +2. HEAVY ENEMY .50 CAL FIRE. BULLET DAMAGE TO CABIN ROOF	11.00	3.20
4-Mar-69	UH-1H	719	SELF	1ST LT MALONEY	CA VINH LONG	1 TRACER ROUND THROUGH FRONT TO REAR OF FUEL CELL, BURNED OUT IN HF RADIO.	1.40	1.00
8-Apr-69	UH-1H	719	SELF	WO1 KNUCKLES	DEFOLIATION MY THO	TOOK HEAVY ENEMY FIRE, BUT ONLY ONE ROUND THROUGH TAILBOOM. LEUT WYNBERG AS GUNNER.	7.30	0.30
6-May-69	UH-1H	712	SELF	WO1 ROBINSON	CA DONG TAM	IED DETONATED PORT QUARTER SUSTAINED 86 SHRAPNEL HITS TO LHS ACFT, CREW CHIEF BADLY WOUNDED, 6 PAX KIA ON EXIT FROM ACFT, SELF SHRAPNEL WOUND TO LH. FLEW ACFT ACROSS MEKONG TO HOSPITAL AT DONG TAM. SHUT DOWN THEN ROTOR BLADE SNAPPED.	4.00	
5-Jun-69	UH-1H	112	SELF	1ST LT KNIGHT	CA BEN TRE	1 HIT TO REAR OF MY SEAT: RECOVERED ROUND FROM BALLISTIC ARMOUR. ROUND IN MY POSSESSION.	10.05	
10-Jul-69	UH-1H	712	SELF	WO1 STRAUB	CA BEN TRE	5 HITS TO ENGINE (FRIENDLY FIRE): ENGINE FAILURE, EOL SUCCESSFUL.	6.30	
6-Aug-69	UH-1H	508	SELF	CW2 KELLAM	DCS GO CONG	ENEMY FIRE ONE HIT TAIL BOOM	7.50	
12-Sep-69	UH-1H	719	SELF	SBLT GIFFEN	CA BEN TRE	ENEMY FIRE ONE HIT TAIL BOOM	5.40	0.15
							103.90	7.10

(Kyle's spreadsheet is provided in its Excel format on USB to the Tribunal)

## LEADING SEAMAN TERRY BROOKS

Hullo again Max

It was good to speak with you again; the last time being in Darwin 2006 or thereabouts or before. I hope what I write here assists you in your submissions.

When I arrived in Vietnam, after a two/three day stop-over in Manila because of a typhoon, it was to stay in Vung Tau for a couple of months. During the first two weeks, along with a couple of other blokes, I was allocated to the Gun Platoon. We worked at re-arming and assembling rockets for the gunships and it was on 4th November 1967 I had my first flight as door-gunner. Being used to flying in Iroquois for periods usually shorter than an hour, you can imagine the feeling I had when the total flying time for that day was 9 hours and 35 minutes! And those first hours of 15 combat assaults are still etched in my mind, because, when we returned to base we simply refuelled without "shutting down". It was something I soon got used to doing over the 11 months I flew as door-gunner. My logbook records 879 hours and 45 minutes, so, for me that averages as good as 80 hours a month, or, 2 hours 40 minutes a day. A bit pedantic here I know, but, when you consider that I was given a few days off here and there, and a couple of weeks R & R back home, there were a lot of hours that were

flown to give me that average. Others, flew more than me and were no doubt shot at a lot more than I. On some days I flew 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 hours and on other days maybe 1 or 2 hours on a standby duty in some way-out place. My longest flying day is recorded as 11 hours 40 minutes.

I was fortunate never to have received any wounds, although I did receive a fraction of brass into my right foot because I fired my M60 machine gun into the outgoing rounds of the mini-gun....'my bad' as they say today... There were some days and evenings we were fired upon and tracers came up at us. On one occasion our pilot set down, and, as we inspected the chopper for bullet holes we found one had gone through one of our rotor blades near the stabilizers. I got a couple of Johnson and Johnson Band-Aids from the medical kit and crossed them over the hole. We flew back to base with no problem.

Whilst engaged in action supporting troops, I had a hang-fire with my M60. Training required immediate action so I levered back the bolt and the round exploded as it was being ejected. Quite frightening and lucky for me I had the visor over my eyes. All crew were alarmed at first until I explained what had happened. A sigh of relief from them as it was a loud explosion in a confined area. I also experienced a worn sear and my M60 refused to cease firing after I had taken finger of the trigger. On this occasion, the M60 being in runaway mode, I was desperately attempting to point the barrel in a safe direction while our chopper was banking to the right. Below, there were troops; also coming into line with the barrel were the rotor blades caused by our banking.

Again, training snapped in, and I broke the ammunition belt and the last few rounds were sent out just before the blades were in the firing line of the M60. I turned toward both pilots and the co-pilot was ashen faced.... as was I. I mention these incidents as I also know there were other incidents with aircrew which were similar to mine. I feel if I hadn't broken the belt I would have shot up the ground troops or shot the blades.... it still scares me to think about it.

On a day when two gunships were to go on a standby duty at Nui Dat, the lead gunship being about 60metres ahead and at tree-top level, took a hit from an RPG and dropped. All crew members were killed. I had been watching the chopper which was to my right and lower than us, and I witnessed the demise of the members. That crew was made up of two Americans and two Australians and I knew them all. Immediately after that incident, we flew on to Nui Dat and did escort duties and supporting of troops for the rest of the day. My log book records flying time of 7 hours that day, and I recall telling myself not to think about the mates we just lost, but to focus of the job ahead. That was a difficult day to complete. All aircrew became friends of each other and the brotherhood was strong. If any were wounded or killed, the rest of us would feel the pain.

My friend Noel Shipp arrived in September and was my replacement in the Gun Platoon. His chopper was shot up badly on his first mission. He flew many more until his demise 31.5.1969. I attended his funeral in June.

Some of our armorers flew as gunners yet had no training prior to these duties. They eagerly took to their tasks and proved themselves as very capable door-gunners. A few other members of our contingent also took up the slack at times and volunteered and flew as door-gunners. They, too, were fired upon on some of their flights. Keith 'Squizzy' Taylor, an aircraft electrician, also flew as a door-gunner to assist shortage of aircrew.

Leading Air-crewman Jeff McIntyre flew as door-gunner with the slicks and he was shot down (I think). I do recall his bringing into my hooch one evening a large piece of shrapnel that had hit his chopper whilst troops were disembarking. That was his souvenir from that LZ. I believe he had quite a few from many LZ's, and, I remember that there were times not all choppers were capable of lifting off after troops disembarking.

You'd know more about that than I, Max. I am suggesting you give Jeff [McIntyre] a call to get his info. I hope I haven't waffled on too much here. Like many of us, there are times when recalling some of the moments can hurt, but, that hurt can be diminished when I think of the camaraderie of the troops of the RANHFV. PT Jones was another who gave of himself a hell of a lot and flew with us to spell one of his Gun Platoon troops.

Stay well, Regards, Terry

## LEUT (PILOT) VIC BATTESE

Hi Max

Re Your questions:

- **November 1967** Tony Casadio – Captain of gunship shot down on 18 Nov 67. Fuel tanks and booster pumps damaged by ground fire and force landed. Crew defended position, killing 2 VC and wounding others before friendly fire drove off attackers.
- Note, four other EMU company aircraft hit by ground fire on 28 & 29 November.
- **19 December 67** Night extraction of troops from heavily defended VC battalion positions. Arty and Gunship suppression on target, no casualties.
- **Company Helos** hit by gunfire on 2 Dec (a gunship), 2 slicks on 14<sup>th</sup>, 1 A/C destroyed and 1 damaged in operational accidents.
- **January 1968.**
  - One UH 1C engine failure (always heavy and flying lots of hours), forced landed in jungle. NAMW K R Wardle and A/LAME French were in the crew and injured. A/C a write off. Wardle evacuated to Australia.
  - Blackhorse threatened with enemy moving on attacks in area.
  - 5 UH 1H and 3 UH 1c hit by ground fire on 8 Jan 1968.
  - EMU's carried out vital ammo resupply to besieged units well into the night.
  - 31 Jan – 2 A/C hit.
- February 1968. 5 aircrew killed including LCDR P J Vickers. Major ops included
  - 1 Feb - 1 pilot wounded.
  - 2 Feb – 1 UH -1H damaged
  - 8 Feb – 8 A/C hit by ground fire and 2 destroyed (one with the loss of all crew (US Army).
  - 22 Feb – Pat Vickers KIA from enemy fire and 1 pilot wounded.
- March 1968 – 9 March -Blackhorse mortared. No company personnel injured, but 8 on base wounded.
  - POACM Phillips narrowly escaped injury as his vehicle ran over a mine between Blackhorse and XUAN Loc. His truck passed over and the second truck exploded the mine.
  - 8 March 1 UH-1C hit by ground fire.
- April 1968 –
  - 22 April- Blackhorse mortared for 2 ½ hours. Surprisingly little damage – some tent holed and 1 soldier received light shrapnel injuries.
  - 16 April one A/C received small arms fire near Tay Ninh.
  - 18 April – 11 A/C hit – including 2 shot down in the Tan An area (one flown by LEUT Crawford (28 holes in fuel tank). Four US Crew were hit. This was my first action under fire, having only been in country about a month, replacing LCDR Vickers. My crew chief was wounded and A/C surprisingly taking only one hit that grazed the fuel

line. It seems the ground fire carefully targeted the exiting troops who all fell. After the first insertion we sent 4 A/C back in with ARVN reinforcements. Later intel reported some 90% casualties of the ARVN troops.

The above should set the picture that

- Operations were frequently subjected to attack
  - Maintainers flew as crew on many occasions
  - Everyone was threatened from mortar attack
  - Maintainers were required to take transport resupply outside the wire.
- 
- As to how many time I was under fire, I recall three attacks from ground fire and one mortar attack while on the ground at Tay Ninh.
  - Separate from the above, Beach Ball Godfrey and I resupplied and ARVN battalion still in contact near the Iron triangle. We did a one way in and out approach to a heavily timbered spot just large enough to get in and do a turnabout the mast using every bit of power we had. Took out bodies for a whole morning.
  - We did do night operations- One particularly comes to mind of 7 September. We spent most of the day in the Delta around Tan An and on return to Blackhorse, were placed on standby. We were called out at night to insert reinforcements in a tight heavily timbered unfamiliar LZ north of Cu Chi. Night work in the delta was bad enough, but going in cold at night to heavily timbered country was tough. LEUT Crawford led that night and did the approach to a single light in the LZ – I was tail end Charlie.

Finally, LEUT John Leak with Andy Craig on board went down in heavy jungle with a rotor head structural failure. Crew survived with back injuries.

LEUT Casadio, POACM Phillips and 2 US Army crew went down just south of Blackhorse in August – all were killed as the UH-1C ammunition exploded.

One could go on; but the above gives a situational picture.

By the way, in my 8 ½ months, I flew 819 hours. I was returned to Australia with the last of the first team in November. I was posted straight to sea as SAR pilot on HS 817. My letter sent from Melbourne to return to VN for a full tour was ignored.

Hope this helps.

Cheers

Vic

## **SBLT (PILOT) JED HART**

I've been through my log book. Like you I only noted down the pilot/co-pilot I was flying with and not the crewmen. I counted the number of times I was hit, but never the number of holes. It didn't seem important at the time. So here goes:

**How many times were you shot down?**

*Twice. March 25th, 1969 when I was flying with Francis and the engine cowling was blown off and on September 18th which was the flight on which I introduced Eric Wile to Vietnam and we took bullet damage and ended up in a rice paddy*

**How many bullet hits did your aircraft take over the year (assuming that you counted them)?**

*I was hit three times and there were multiple holes each time. Don't know how many.*

**Did you list the whole of your aircraft crew when you flew and if so do you have the names of any of the Australian aircrew? Not just the Aircrewmembers but the Cook, Writer, Photographer and Medic and others who were part of our Contingent and may have flown with you on occasion.**

*No records, I'm sorry to say. Just the other pilot I was with.*

**Do you have any recollection of the number of hot LZs you went into?**

*I flew on 116 days, a total of 787 hours. Allowing a couple of hours a day for transit flying, something like 555 hours or so would have been dedicated to combat assaults. Say an hour and a half for pick-up, approach and landing at LZ, I reckon that is something in the order of 370 combat assaults. If you averaged out the ones during Tet and at other busy times when many landings were into hot LZ's with the more placid times, I'm going to say that somewhere around one in five were hot LZ's overall. That amounts to 74 landings with opposing fire.*

*Of course, when we flew at night it became obvious (from the green tracer) that there were pot shots taken at us all the time, not just while we were approaching LZ's.*

*Night work also made it obvious that friendly fire was a very real danger. Worse than enemy fire? That would be unkind. But I think the risk was there from friendly fire almost every time we landed and transited around the Delta - we certainly saw a lot of red tracer.*

**Any snippet about the types of flying?**

- *Defoliation flying was a duty I didn't care for much. Always in an area designated as controlled by the enemy; always low level; predictable runs backwards and forwards. Very dangerous in my view, and we always came back soaked with Agent Orange because of the recirculation of air through the open cabin and cockpit*
- *Hash and trash flights could be uneventful or extremely hazardous. As you might recall on such a flight on April 18th 1969 while flying with Martin we found ourselves machine gunning retreating NVA and killed 10 of the enemy. That was all low level flying directing machine gun fire into a determined enemy who were trying to bring us*

*down in order to make good their retreat. We Medivaced a heap of ARVN the same day. I say Medivaced, but we took the dead out at the same time - all piled up in the back. Medivac was another Alternate C&C/Hash and Trash job that was rewarding but also dangerous and certainly gory at times. I did many such flights.*

- I'm not sure how many Eagle flights I did. Four I think and one was definitely not within Vietnam. Those were flights where the exposure was very high if anything went wrong with the aircraft. Fortunately, nothing did for my flights.*
- I remember, many mornings, finding the Crew Chief and Gunner asleep in the back of the aircraft when I got to the flight line to start the day. Sometimes they were just grabbing some shuteye after doing the pre-flight, but there were also times when they were there because they had been working through the night and had sacked out in the aircraft rather than waste time going back to their hooches. As you did I'm sure, we'd let them sleep on the way down to the Delta until approach to POL.*
- On 26th September 1969, 10 days after my 21st birthday, I was C&C when the flight was mortared in a PZ. The flight got airborne but had been peppered and we eventually had seven helicopters on the ground after various emergencies resulting from battle damage, with the crews picked up by the gunships and other slicks and our C&C aircraft. That was a few days before I left to go back to Australia and last day I flew in country.*

I hope that helps a bit Max. It's not complete and I'm afraid my recording of events at the time was the bare minimum. Drinking and shouting the odds in the bar then sacking out before the next day seemed more important than making notes for posterity. Whoever would have imagined living to the age of 70?

All the best.

Kind regards

Jed Hart