

Some Thoughts on 723 Squadron and Its Iroquois – Part I

My very first look at 723 Squadron was with five others, all of us recently returned from the Royal Navy's Observer Course in Malta and on 1st February 1963, being sat out in the hot sun at the threshold of RW21 to be winched up into a Sycamore a few times before going to 725 Squadron to commence our anti-submarine sonar training in the RAN's new Wessex 31A.

David Collingridge and I had joined up together, had a great time in Malta, been on 817SQN for a while and in the fullness of time we had applied to become pilots as did most of us in that first Observer Course – Barry Diamond, Dave, Bob Waldron and me. Dave and I had been more or less equal top of everything the RAAF Pilots' Course No. 63 had to offer and we both expected to fly the Navy's new A4 Skyhawk. Dave went to the A4s and I was relegated to Second Eleven, wasn't happy, and told everyone so.

My first flight in Iroquois UH-1B 892 was with Lieutenant Peter Ward on 13th February and I eventually passed Helicopter Conversion Course Number 11 in April and was duly posted to 725 SQN Wessex 31A in May, 1968. At that time the squadron had six Hueys – 893 through to 898.

I have no recollection of when the 2nd Contingent of HFV personnel were named but I did fly with LCDR GR (Zork) Rohrsheim who was to be the OIC, as well as Charlie Rex, Mike Perrott, and Rick Symons, all Acting SBLTS, and Lieutenant Peter Ward who was to be the 2IC or Senior Pilot.

A lot of things were going on around this time that I was more or less blissfully unconcerned about – the Vietnam War with the 1st Contingent RANHFV already in place for some five or six months. Then on 22nd February, LCDR PJ Vickers, RAN, was killed in Vietnam. Along with most of the Air Station personnel, I attended a memorial service for him in the chapel a week or so later.

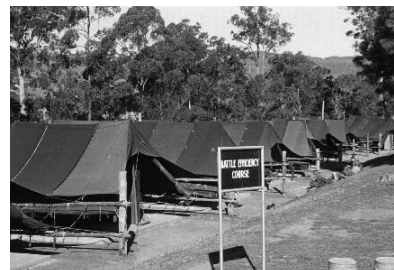
By June I was well into my Wessex conversion when on 5th June, Peter Ward with two aircrewmembers on board crashed in Iroquois 896 and all were killed out at Beecroft Range. Their aircraft didn't pull out after a torque turn, hit very hard, slid over the cliff and into the sea below. It took some extremely brave diving to recover the bodies. Why it was up to me, I don't know but I had the terrible task to tell Peter's wife's father when two of the bodies were recovered, but not Peter's.

It hadn't occurred to me yet but clearly had to others that I was going to Vietnam with the 2nd Contingent. To this day I recall standing in the sun outside "A" hangar chatting with a few fellow pilots about who might be Peter Ward's replacement and being told by Bob Waldron that it was to be me. Within an hour or so I was told to report to CMDR (AIR) Ron McKenzie, who smilingly gave me the news – as if I should be pleased.

So I was back at 723SQN but only long enough to pack bags and go to the Army's Jungle Training School at Canungra, QLD, for their three week Battle Efficiency Course. Then from July, it was back into the Iroquois and a very hectic work-up for Vietnam albeit we had no real first-hand information to work off as the 1st Contingent were still in place.



Zork's Cowboys (L) and our accommodation. I had never felt so insecure arriving in my starched whites, suitcase in hand and being shown my new home!



We did lots of confined area landings and similar exercises as well as having the Aircrewmen firing borrowed M60s from the back of the aircraft. The firing of one or two short bursts from about 1,500 feet paled into insignificance for the real thing – continuous bursts of 20 – 30 seconds, thousands of rounds every landing zone until the barrels were too hot and had to be changed. But that's how we did it – in training, the rounds only go one way, there is no shooting back as Jed Hart said so well.

How LTCOL Colin Khan, CO 5RAR, came to be in the Tianjara Area with his troops is not clear but all of a sudden our work-up flying was devoted almost exclusively to moving his soldiers around. Six fully loaded soldiers, a crewman in the back, and two pilots in a B-model with a T53-L-11 1100 shp (820 kW) engine must have been pushing the envelope in every way. This was realistic flying without the incoming fire!

It was winter so Density Alt. will have been very favourable but it was demanding flying all the same. Night flying in and out of confined areas guided only by the shielded light of a torch or two on the ground to show a way in and no landing lights made us all work hard. Later we met up with COL Khan at Nui Dat for a mighty BBQ on Anzac Day 1969.



*LEUT Max Speedy with CO 5RAR, LTCOL Colin Khan
July/Aug 1968 at Tianjara*



Well organised, 5RAR Troops with 2nd Contingent.

During this work-up period, I flew with the other pilots of the 2nd Contingent: SBLTs Tom Supple, Bob Kyle, and Tony Huelin. Tony and his American crew were killed in Vietnam on 3rd January, 1969; he was replaced by SBLT Jed Hart. The other person killed in our Contingent was Leading Aircrewman Noel Ervin Shipp and his crew, all Americans again (31st May, 1969). Shipp today is honoured by the SHIPP Division at the Recruit School, HMAS CERBERUS. Five others were wounded: Naval Airman CC StClair most seriously so; the others were Charlie Rex, Rick Symons, Petty Officer Ron Cole, and Able Seaman JA Shepherd. In all though, the RANHFV lost five killed and 22 wounded in Vietnam. LEUT AA (Tony) Casadio and Petty Officer OCI (Darky) Phillips were killed on 22nd August, 1968, just a week or so before our departure and that put a very sombre shadow over all of us.

Our 2nd Contingent left 723SQN around end of August, 1968 for a week's leave, and we were posted to HMAS Penguin for admin purposes while in Vietnam¹. We left Australia on 10th and arrived at Camp Blackhorse on 11th September. On 12th I got my Flak vest, chicken plate and helmet from one of the guys leaving that day for home, had a check ride in the UH-1H, fired my personal S&W 38 Police

¹ With the postings to PENGUIN, all the wives lost their married quarters' places and with that, the support of the other wives. There were no personnel support services back then – just the Chaplain to tell the unlucky one her husband had been killed!

Special, and on the 13th September flew the first of my 1,250 combat hours into countless enemy held landing zones during my year with the 135th Assault Helicopter Company.

All four RANHFV Contingents were 723 SQN personnel, and all of them served most gallantly. There were a large number of decorations and awards made; some say that the RANHFV was the most decorated of the Navy's units to participate in the Vietnam War. Whether true or not, the RANHFV took part in the most intense combat of any other naval unit since World War II to the present day.

I wasn't to see 723SQN again until 1972.



Working-up with 5RAR in and around the Tianjara area prior to both our deployments to Vietnam.



On the flight deck of HMAS SYDNEY going to NZ for EX COLD KOALA. Commencing Australian service in 1948, this was quite possibly the last time the Vung Tau Ferry had aircraft operating from her (Apr/May 1973). She was scrapped in November 1973.

Some More Thoughts – Part II

So after Vietnam and all that, I went to the UK on exchange and came back to Nowra in early 1972 to 725SQN flying the Wessex 31B, an upgraded 31A model with more power and a bigger sonar ball dangling off 500 feet of cable. It needed every bit of the extra power but it was fun flying.

As the Vietnam War finally came to its grinding halt, I was posted in command of 723SQN on 31st October, 1972, still a Lieutenant and by some counts, the youngest ever to do so. The last time I had seen LEUT Stafford Lowe had been in Vietnam when I took over a corner of his cabin in the *House of Lords* officers' quarters²; he was finishing a momentous year as the 135th AHC's maintenance test pilot. This time he was handing over the baton of 723SQN to me. It was a pleasant and proper surprise this time, made all the more so because like my notice to go to Vietnam, there was no notice!



As a communications squadron, we did a huge variety of jobs and each day could be counted on for something demanding. First and foremost, we were available 24/7 as the Search and Rescue go-to for anything by anyone, military or civil, that occurred south of Sydney. Principally though, we were on call for our fixed wing squadron personnel who might have bailed out. On working days, a five minute response to airborne was the norm and outside working hours, 30 minutes was accepted. One aircraft was either on the flight line (by day and when there was night flying) or readied in all respects including its pre-flight in the hangar out-of-hours.

As I had come back from the UK with an A1 QHI rating (nowadays QFI (H) A1), I did lots of flight ratings checks and so on. At the time there was no supporting infrastructure such as exists today through the plethora of higher and more coordinated authorities and formalised links with all sorts of training and flying organisations. Seeing these things now in 2020 (with 20:20 hindsight too), I should have done more to improve what was a non-existent Australian Navy system that I was nominally in charge of but I was enjoying my command role and at that level the Squadron was performing all its allocated tasks very well.

In April 1973 with three aircraft (893, 894 & 895) I embarked HMAS SYDNEY with an Army Battalion to take part in Exercise COLD KOALA at the NZ Army Training Base, Waiouru, North Island, NZ. Cold it was but our squadron personnel had a very rewarding time over the 18 days we were away. And I had a few flying surprises as well!

Half way across the Tasman Sea to NZ, in relatively calm seas, we flew the aircraft mainly to make sure they would be serviceable on arrival. Bearing in mind it was a skidded aircraft, for whatever reason, we weren't tied down on start up. Just as I got to a slow idle, the ship rolled significantly enough to

² Sounding far more glorious than it ever was, a ramshackle arrangement of ply walls and flooring, at least it was not a tent that most others had. We were 50 metres from one of the 11th Cavalry 105mm batteries which were in constant action – sleep was never easy until one differentiated the whoosh/crack (incoming) from the crack/whoosh (outgoing)!

send me skating across the deck and likely to go over the side. I made the fastest wind-up ever and pulling pitch on the way, managed to make a very low hover with the low-RPM beeper on for ages. Later on that flight a little more composed, I buzzed a solitary yacht and gave its occupants an even bigger surprise to see a chopper about 600NM from the nearest land! They are probably still wondering how I got there.

We disembarked the aircraft at Wellington and flew on to Waiouru while the ship went to Auckland to wait for us there. I chose not to fly many flights during the exercise – I'd done the real thing and my young pilots had a chance for something really different which they appreciated.

I had come prepared for something else anyway – trout fishing which in that part of the world is amongst the best to be had. So I did some and then, taking one of the aircraft up to Auckland, I convinced CO SYDNEY, CAPT Andrew Robertson, RAN, that he ought to get a fishing rod himself. With the Australian Naval Liaison Officer, Wellington, in tow, we headed off to a *Batch* on the Tongariro River where for the lack of a space to land, I winched my passengers down and flew to Waiouru Army Camp, shut down and then in a Land Rover made available for me, went back and joined in the fishing fun. All of us got great catches, and most diplomatically my 4 ½ pound trout was well beaten by the Captain's 6 pounder. A great time was had by all and I flew them back to Auckland, via Mount Ruapehu and Ngauruhoe, a day or so later before finally rejoining my squadron at Waiouru.

While enjoying the views around the top Mt. Ruapehu and its crater lake, a bit short of 10,000 feet, I had been pulling more and more pitch to maintain height. To my horror, the Low RPM beeper went off and I thought I had an engine failure! In the instant I dropped the collective and turned away from the mountain praying that my glide angle would be better than the slope confronting me, I told those with me to brace up. Just as quickly, the RPM came back with the lesser load and all was well.





It was a tough gig being a Squadron CO in those days. I can well imagine the trout photo would warrant a parliamentary inquiry and the resignation of COMFAA, if not CN these days. As for the offender, well the fishing was great!

In Auckland finally with all my aircraft in one piece and on board, there was a cocktail party for the local dignitaries on the last night. My Senior Pilot, Lieutenant Trevor Rieck, had me worried – he took quite a fancy to my 18 year old sister and more worryingly, she to him. Fortunately, it was only a one night event!

On the return trip to Australia, CAPT Robertson *Cleared Lower Deck* to sadly announce that the Government had decided not to continue SYDNEY's magnificent role as a troop carrier. A sad and somewhat ignoble end given the Australian Army could never have maintained its military presence in Vietnam (or any other theatre) for so long without the Vung Tau Ferry.



Once back at Nowra, life slipped into a milder phase. The CO ALBATROSS, CAPT Domara Andrew Heaps Clarke, DSC, MVO, (*Nobby* to all) once CO ANZAC and Escort Ship to HM QUEEN Elizabeth II's Royal Tour, decided he wished to become a helicopter pilot. He duly reported most mornings for his flight briefing and off he and I would go. Now as all helicopter pilots know, flying them is more about beating all sorts of aerodynamic principles into submission – it not easy to fly a helicopter and the easier route is usually via a fixed wing aircraft for first principles. Try as he might and as safely as I could assist, he was never going to manage to hover, something one has to do twice every flight. Very diplomatically (and for him, it must have been a blow), he agreed it was not for him and we parted friends.

Not long after we had returned from NZ, it was suggested in very high places that a last fling for HMAS SYDNEY was to accompany HMNZS CANTERBURY to Mururoa Atoll as a resupply vessel, fuel and stores, while CANTERBURY made a protest against the French for their atomic testing programme. 723SQN aircraft would go with SYDNEY. HMAS SUPPLY went instead of SYDNEY so nor did we but the Navy Photos had a great time in their dark room!



723SQN was a training squadron. Just as I had done mine in 1968 – learnt to fly a helicopter and then off to 725SQN for the operational phase before 817SQN and submarine hunting from HMAS MELBOURNE. But now in 1972 was the big change in my life. There was no one else on 723SQN who I had flown with in Vietnam nor did it seem were there many others around elsewhere.

Vietnam in 1972 anyway was seen as a totally irrelevant event even though the ink had not dried on the Paris Peace Accords. A number of RANHFV pilots had gone to the A4 Skyhawks, some were on 817SQN and a number had left the service. It was the same for our loyal sailors. But neither the Fleet Air Arm nor the wider Navy had any need for our collective war experiences. In many ways, those who had not been to Vietnam were seen to have done the more meritorious service; certainly more important to one's career. In places, there was quite open resentment to anyone having been to Vietnam, reciprocated with feeling too, I might add, not that it changed the situation³.

I have noted earlier the gallantry that all the members of the RANHFV, all 723SQN personnel, had displayed while in Vietnam. One day in 1973 a very large item arrived at the maintenance stores office. It turned out to be the Battle Honours for "Vietnam 1965 – 1972" with 723 Squadron nominated, of which the RANHFV was a part but not recognising the RANHFV itself. No pomp, no ceremony, no official acknowledgement! In truth, I really didn't know what to do with it and no one else from the Chief of Navy Staff down to Commander Air cared. It was hung in the squadron's crew room along with the near life-sized Play Boy photo of a very talented young lady.

Fast forward to 2017 and the Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal (DHAAT). While many of the pilots especially and some others had received awards, the success with which the maintainers,

³ What eventually did change things and can be seen now as a big positive was the acknowledgement by the Australian public in 1987 that it was their government that had sent us to war – blame them, not the military doing their work.

cooks, medics, and the un-sung, had allowed us pilots to carry out our roles had not been acknowledged. A number of people, myself included, made the case that at the very least, the whole of the RANHFV personnel, some 196 souls in all, should be awarded some form of citation.

The RANHFV already had been awarded the Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry Unit Citation with Palm Leaf but that had come without fanfare and everyone⁴ who served in Vietnam had one of those. We wanted recognition from the Royal Australian Navy for everyone who had been a volunteer door gunner, a maintainer who went out into enemy territory to fix our aircraft, the cooks who made the best Battalion Chow Halls in the region, the Medics who had worked tirelessly in the trauma wards for weeks on end during the Tet Offensives and all the rest who did their best for us.

During the DHAAT hearings, it was suggested by Defence personnel that the Battle Honour was sufficient and due record of what the RANHFV had done. Being present on that day at the hearings and as CO 723SQN when the honour board arrived, I made the point that it had never been seen as worthy recognition and if it had been, no one was prepared to say so on the day.

The RAN's second Unit Citation for Gallantry, the sixth in the whole of the ADF to date, was awarded to the RANHFV. In August 2018 at the Australian War Memorial, it was presented to those of us still standing. The UCG, the Burgee, and its citation were presented by His Excellency, The Governor General, Sir Peter Cosgrove AK, CVO, AM, and VADM Tim Barrett, AO, CSC, RAN.



Older, more tired, but well and truly proud of being part of an experiment that was not expected to achieve much. In the event the RANHFV led all the way.

This is a mighty testament to a great squadron of which I was a very proud part.

Max Speedy,
CMDR, DSC, RAN Ret.
July, 2020

⁴ I mean everyone – Americans (2.7million), Australians (60,000+), Kiwis (3,000), Sth. Koreans (300,000), and Thais (40,000).