

**ROYAL AUSTRALIAN
NAVY HELICOPTER
FLIGHT**

VIETNAM

"On the ground the aviators were attacked by the Viet Cong. The downed helicopter's machine guns were detached and used to excellent effect on the advancing enemy troops, at least two of whom were killed before the crew could be rescued by another helicopter."

In July 1967, the Minister for the Navy announced that a detachment of naval aviators and aircraft maintainers would be sent to South Vietnam.

As the sailors would be flying and maintaining United States Army helicopters, a new unit comprising personnel only, was formed. The unit, which included eight pilots, four observers, four aircrewmembers, 24 aircraft maintainers and six non technical support staff, was named the Royal Australian Navy Helicopter Flight - Vietnam (RANHVF). Lt Cdr Neil Ralph, a dedicated naval

aviator with considerable flying experience, was appointed to command the RANHVF.

Personnel for the RANHVF were drawn from the Fleet Air Arm's Squadrons - ashore and afloat - and concentrated within 723 Squadron at Nowra, New South Wales.

After an intensive 'working up' period during which they received training in army support techniques, (which differed radically from their previous anti submarine and fleet support duties), the first contingent of the RANHVF flew

to Saigon in Qantas aircraft between October 16 and 18 1967.

From Saigon the naval personnel were transported to Vung Tau where they were integrated with the 135th Assault Helicopter Company (135th AHC).

The 135th AHC was at the time one of around 70 helicopter companies deployed in Vietnam to provide air mobility for American, Vietnamese and other 'Free World' troops. Equipped with about 30 UH-1H and UH-1C Iroquois (Huey) helicopters, the 330 man com-



Just arrived in Vietnam are members of the First Contingent of the RANHVF (l to r) Ldg Airman K French, Ldg Seaman Dawe, Ldg Aircrewman Brooks, Lt Cdr Neil Ralph (CO of the RANHVF), Lt Battese, Petty Off O Phillips (killed in action), Lt R Crawford, Ldg Seaman McIntyre, Lt Ray Godfrey, Lt Jones and Lt Col R Cory (CO of the 135th AHC). (ANAM)

pany, under the command of Lt Col RM Cory, had only been in Vietnam for a few weeks before its Royal Australian Navy component arrived.

With the arrival of the RANHFV, the Australians were placed in positions within the company according to their rank and experience. Lt Cdr Ralph became the 135th AHC's Deputy Commander while at the same time retaining administrative control of his own men. The other Australians were divided between the company's four platoons. Two platoons flew lightly armed transport helicopters (10 to 12 UH-1H helicopters each). A third platoon operated eight UH-1C gunships – attack helicopters heavily armed with miniguns, rockets or grenade launchers and machine guns. A fourth maintenance platoon, in which the RANHFV's aircraft maintainers served, carried out vital maintenance work on the helicopters.

The integration of Royal Australian Navy personnel into a United States

Army unit was looked upon as an interesting experiment by the American Command who designated the 135th AHC an 'Experimental Military Unit', or 'EMU'. The company's nickname of 'The Emus' was thus born.

Before commencing operations, the naval aviators were split up and attached to helicopter companies throughout Vietnam for two weeks to gain operational experience. During their attachments most of the Australians came under fire for the first time.

Into Action

On reassembling at Vung Tau, the 135th AHC was declared fully operational and began combat flying on November 2.

In mid November 1967, the 135th AHC was involved in an extensive operation north east of Beinh Hoa. The company's task was to insert American troops into a clearing. The troops were to construct a fire support base. The

base was quickly established but came under such intense attack it had to be evacuated four days later. While extracting the troops, one of the company's Hueys had a large tarpaulin sucked up into its main rotor. The helicopter was flung onto its side and destroyed. Fortunately, the American crew escaped without injury.

On November 19 a light fire team of two gunships was scrambled to attack Viet Cong positions near Saigon in the Rung Sat Special Zone. The gunships attacked, only to be met by accurate return fire. One machine, captained by Sub Lt A A Casadio, was hit repeatedly and forced to land.

On the ground the aviators were attacked by the Viet Cong. The downed helicopter's machine guns were detached and used to excellent effect on the advancing enemy troops, at least two of whom were killed before the crew could be rescued by another helicopter.



135th AHC Huey supporting 1ATF operations in Phuoc Tuy Province. (ANAM)



A US Army Chinook medium lift helicopter over Camp Black Horse. Chinooks were used extensively to recover downed 135th AHC Hueys. (ANAM)



Maintenance facilities at Camp Black Horse. (ANAM)

The flying skill, leadership qualities and personal bravery displayed by Sub Lt Casadio in this action were later acknowledged with the award of an American Distinguished Flying Cross – the first award to a member of the RANHFV and possibly the first to the 135th AHC. Casadio's crew also achieved the unenviable distinction of being the first crew of the company to be shot down in Vietnam.

In December, the 135th AHC moved from its well established base at Vung Tau to Camp Blackhorse in Long Khanh Province. The move was not welcomed as maintenance and recreational facilities at the new location were of a much lower standard than those enjoyed at Vung Tau.

Flying commitments were not reduced during the move and as the company's aircrews were logging 140 hours flying each per month – about a year's peacetime flying in Australia – the maintenance platoon worked long hours to keep the Hueys airworthy, while at the same time setting up new maintenance facilities at Blackhorse.

The maintenance platoons workload was added to significantly on January 8 1968 when no fewer than eight Hueys were damaged by ground fire while supporting American troops in the vicinity of Saigon. Lt Crawford's crew figured prominently in the action which continued into the night. After dusk they took off in a damaged Huey on an urgent dustoff and ammunition resupply. Despite very heavy ground fire they entered into a hostile landing



Naval Airman Waskin prepares for another mission from Camp Black Horse in 1968. (ANAM)



After an initial insertion, 'Emu' Hueys wait on a road for further calls for assistance from the troops they are supporting. (ANAM)

zone to extract wounded men and resupply those who remained on the ground'. By their actions the lives of the more severely wounded soldiers were undoubtedly saved.

On January 12 one of the company's Hueys was lost near Baria, Phuoc Tuy Province, when it crashed into dense jungle. The helicopter burned on impact, injuring the crew which included Leading Mechanic French and Naval Airman Wardle. An RAAF Iroquois was soon on the scene and the fliers were winched out of the jungle amidst exploding fuel and ammunition. French was only slightly injured in the incident, suffering a sprained ankle, but Wardle was less fortunate. He received severe arm and leg injuries which forced his evacuation to Australia.

In February pilots from 9 Squadron (RAAF) were attached to the 135th AHC to gain experience in the operation of the UH-1H, with which 9 Squadron was

to be re-equipped. The older UH-1B helicopters 9 Squadron was then flying were both smaller and less powerful than UH-1Hs. Subsequently RAAF (and RNZAF) pilots saw action with the company for several months.

Recalling his attachment to the 135th AHC, Flg Off Wells (RNZAF) made the following notable comments: "It was an intensive week of combat assaults into 'LZs' in Dong Tam, Nui Dat, Phuoc Vinh and Tay Ninh. During that week I flew 33 hours which was about twice what I would have flown with 9 Squadron in the same period."

On February 22 a platoon of 11 Hueys was tasked to extract South Vietnamese troops near Xuan Loc, in Long Khanh Province. While leading the platoon into the landing zone, Lt Cdr P J Vickers' helicopter came under accurate fire and took several hits. One round penetrated the cockpit and severely wounded the Australian. The

copilot aborted the mission and flew the damaged Huey to the nearest hospital.

Unfortunately, Lt Cdr Vickers died soon after admission and became the first Australian pilot of any service to die in Vietnam.

On March 9, Camp Blackhorse came under a sustained mortar attack. In the terrifyingly accurate bombardment, unit stores and facilities suffered damage and several American personnel were wounded.

Next morning Lt J M Leak awoke to find the tail fin of a mortar bomb protruding from the sand bagged wall of his tent – not six inches from his head. The bomb was still live but fortunately had failed to detonate.

Doubtful Loyalties

On May 18 a flight of ten Hueys put down in a landing zone near Long An without the usual 'softening up' by ar-



Ldg Seaman Tudor and a US Army maintainer inspect a large calibre bullet hole in the tail boom of a Huey. (ANAM)

tillery and gunships, in an attempt to take the Viet Cong by surprise.

The experiment proved disastrous. The Platoon settled into the paddy field without opposition but as their troops began to disembark, the helicopters came under withering fire from the Viet Cong who had been waiting, concealed in small fox holes, complete with lids which had rice growing on them.

All the Hueys were hit and the South Vietnamese troops panicked and refused to get out. Eventually some of them had to be thrown out by the helicopter gunners.

After 'disembarking' their troops, those helicopters still able took off, but few made it back to base as most crashed or force landed along the way. Two helicopters were destroyed and the remaining eight badly damaged. The ARVN troops engaged suffered severe casualties. Several RANHFV pilots and crewmen were involved in this incident and it was fortunate indeed that none was killed or wounded.

As with many armies, the quality of the soldiers within the South Vietnamese Army varied from unit to unit. Some were highly trained and performed well under fire. Others suffered from low morale, poor training and indifferent leadership. At times ARVN troops refused to leave their helicopters when the enemy was active in the landing zone. This was exasperating to the helicopter crews who regularly braved intense ground fire to get them there in the first place. Depending on the mood of the crews the troops were either flown back to base or forced out of the helicopters – sometimes at gun point.

Commenting on this situation, one Australian pilot noted: "As for lack of discipline and cowardice under fire goes, the 18th and 23rd ARVN divisions were the worst in the 3 and 4 Corps areas, although even these divisions had their good companies. The 'Rangers' were the elite of their army and the Vietnamese troops we most liked to work with."

The security of helicopters when working with the ARVN was also a matter of grave concern to the 135th AHC's crews. A number of South Vietnamese soldiers were also members of the Viet Cong and instances had occurred where individual ARVN soldiers fired on their helicopters after disembarking. Losses both in men and helicopters resulted from these traitorous attacks.

As a result of this type of action, there was an unwritten (but very real) law between the ARVN and their helicopter crews that if at any time during an operation Vietnamese troops turned



Lt Andy Craig enjoys a break from flying in the Officers' Mess. (ANAM)

back towards the helicopters with weapons in their hands they would be immediately shot by the helicopter gunners. Extreme action of this type was carried out a number of times, particularly during opposed assault landings.

Urban Warfare

On June 3 1968 Sub Lt Ray Godfrey's crew was tasked with a very unusual mission. A small group of Viet Cong had taken over a four storey building in downtown Saigon and defied all attempts by the government forces to dislodge them. Godfrey's mission was to drop tear gas canisters into the building which would hopefully flush the Viet Cong out into the open. To guard against the effects of gas entering the helicopter, the copilot (Plt Off Alexander, RAAF) wore a gas mask throughout the operation.

On identifying the building the helicopter flew overhead, while the crewmen dropped canisters out of the Huey. Unfortunately, while some of the canisters landed on its roof, the gas did not permeate the building's air supply sufficiently to force the Viet Cong out.

Realising that this form of attack was unlikely to succeed, Godfrey descended to treetop (or rather building top!) height, and after a frightening flight between the buildings of Saigon's business district, passed just to the side of the building in question, while the crewmen threw the canisters through its windows. "That got the bludgers out",

commented Godfrey, who later received a signal from the ground force commander congratulating the crew on their fine feat of airmanship which bought the siege to a conclusion.

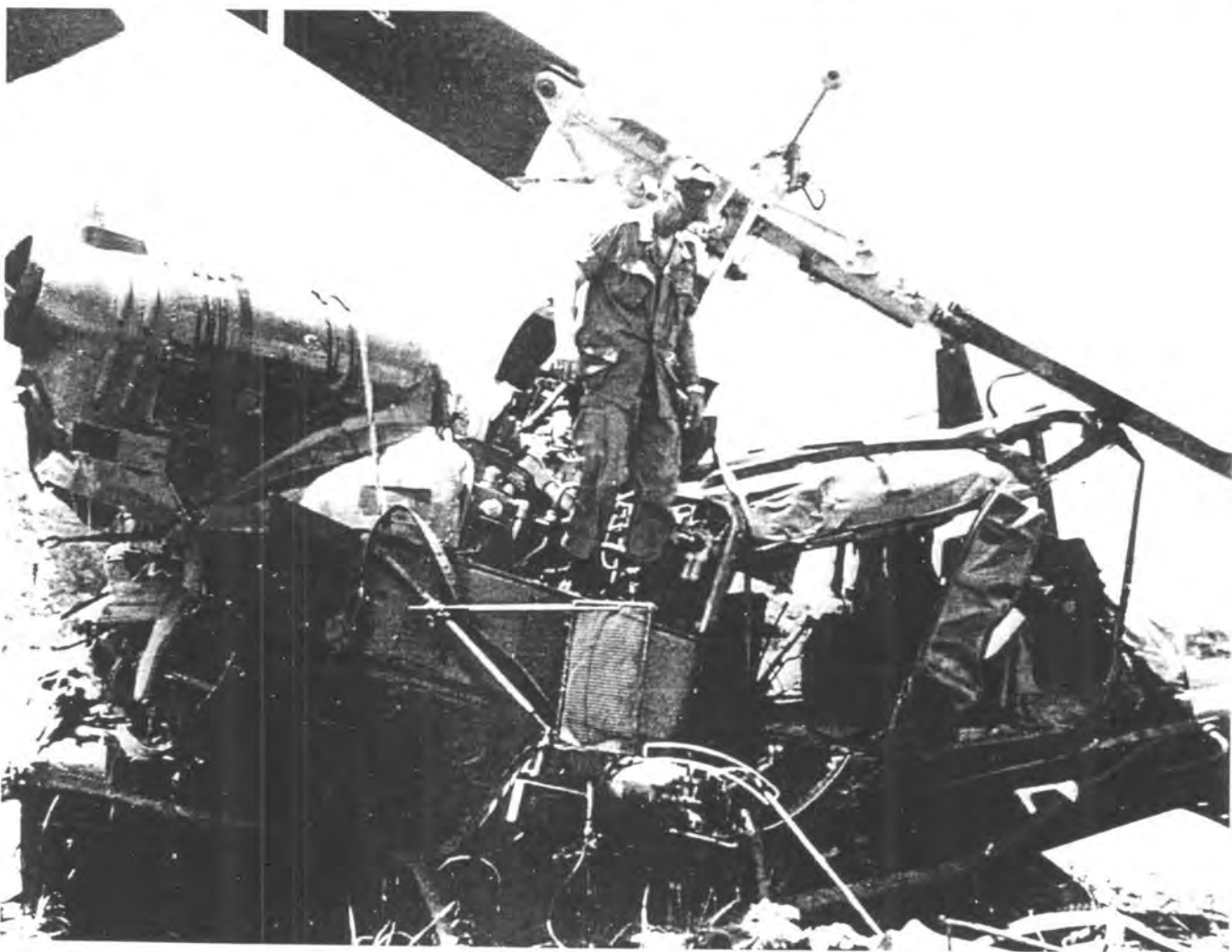
While escorting a platoon of Hueys to a defence position near Saigon on June 13 a gunship crewed by Lt Leak, Sub Lt A Craig (from the RAN detachment – 9 Squadron), Ldg Seaman D J Green and an American soldier suffered a mechanical failure and crashed into the jungle from an altitude of 500 feet.

"We went through some extreme attitudes on the way down and it was sheer luck that the helo landed right way up on the jungle canopy as it was quite uncontrollable", recalled Craig. The crippled helicopter tore through the trees to fortunately land on its skids.

The other helicopters landed nearby and disembarked their Australian troops to secure the area. Would-be rescuers were horrified to find the wrecked helicopter's engine still running and what's more, it could not be turned off. With ammunition and fuel from ruptured tanks around the crash site, the risk of an explosion was great. Nonetheless the injured crew were dragged from their machine and flown to hospital by an RAAF dustoff Iroquois.

The three Australians were sitting on armoured seats and broke their backs. The American gunner did not have an armoured seat and this saved his back but he was thrown forward into his machine gun which cut up his face

The remains of the Huey in which Lt Craig, Lt J Leak and Ldg Seaman D Green were seriously injured. (ANAM)



quite a bit. The injured aviators were later evacuated to Australia, Craig recovering so quickly he was again flying in Vietnam by 1969.

On August 21 another of the company's gunships was lost near Blackhorse when a Light Fire Team came under fire while at low level. The machine, captained by Sub Lt Casadio, was hit by a rocket propelled grenade and crashed in flames. All the crew, including Casadio and Petty Officer O C Phillips, perished.

Of Sub Lt Casadio's exploits, something has already been mentioned. Phillips was a real unit personality who possessed an intense dislike for the enemy. He went on so many jungle patrols with the Australian Army he qualified for that service's 'infantry combat badge'.

He was also a qualified 'Pathfinder', a term used to describe a select group of personnel skilled in the reconnaissance and setting up of landing zones.

The loss of this fine crew had a depressing effect on the 135th AHC and especially the RANHFV component. The naval unit had almost finished its tour of duty and the loss of their fellow Australians was a severe shock.

New Arrivals

In September 1968 the first contingent of the RANHFV's tour of duty drew to a close. It was replaced en masse by the second contingent, commanded by Lt Cdr G R Rohrsheim, which arrived at Blackhorse on the 9th. After handing over to the newly arrived contingent, the time expired sailors departed for Australia and well deserved leave. The second contingent quickly settled into the company and were soon in action.

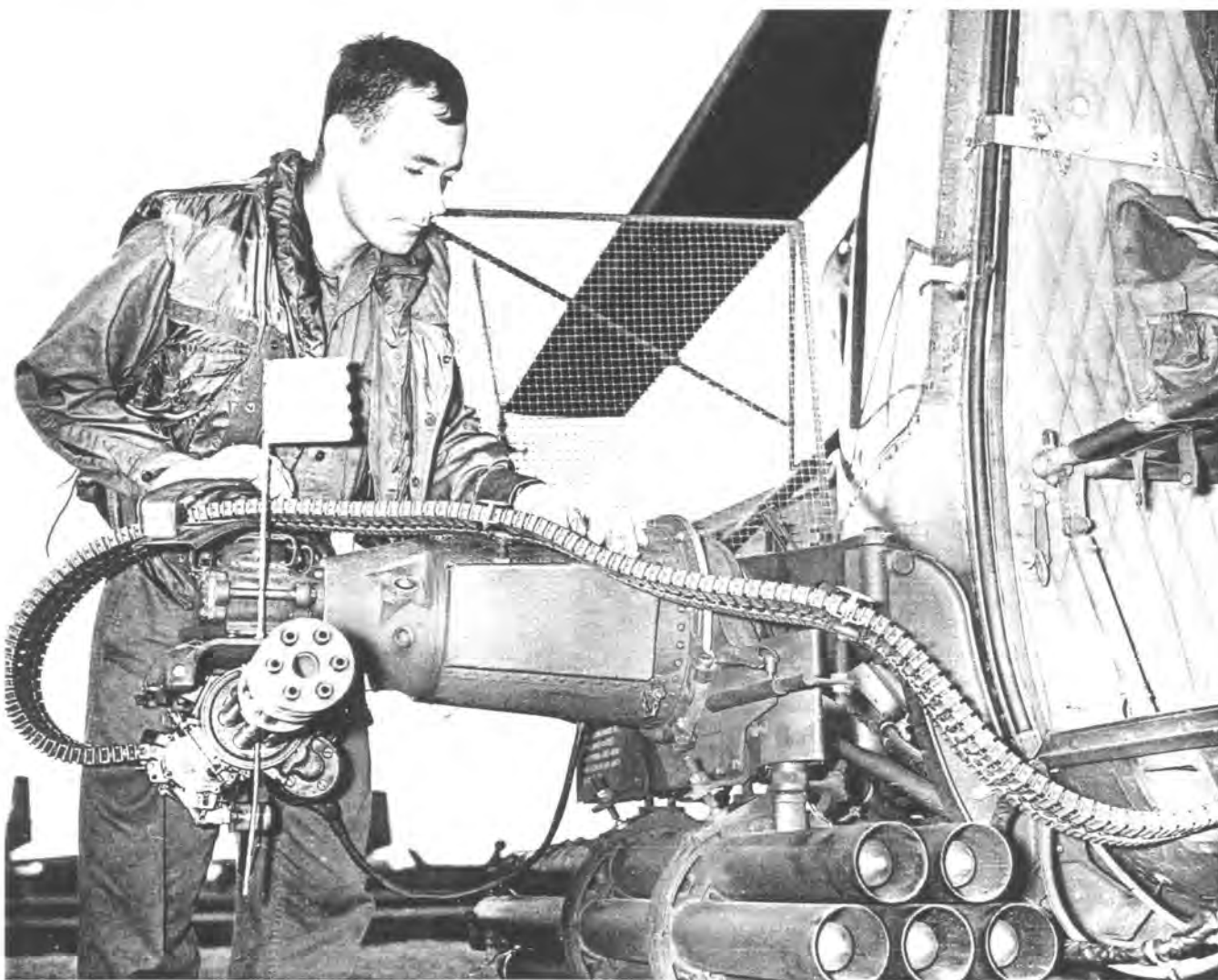
While supporting allied troops in the Ben Tre area on October 23, no fewer than nine of the company's Hueys were hit by ground fire. Two were so severely damaged they were later written off. By

working through the night, the maintenance platoon had most of the remaining helicopters serviceable for the next day's operations.

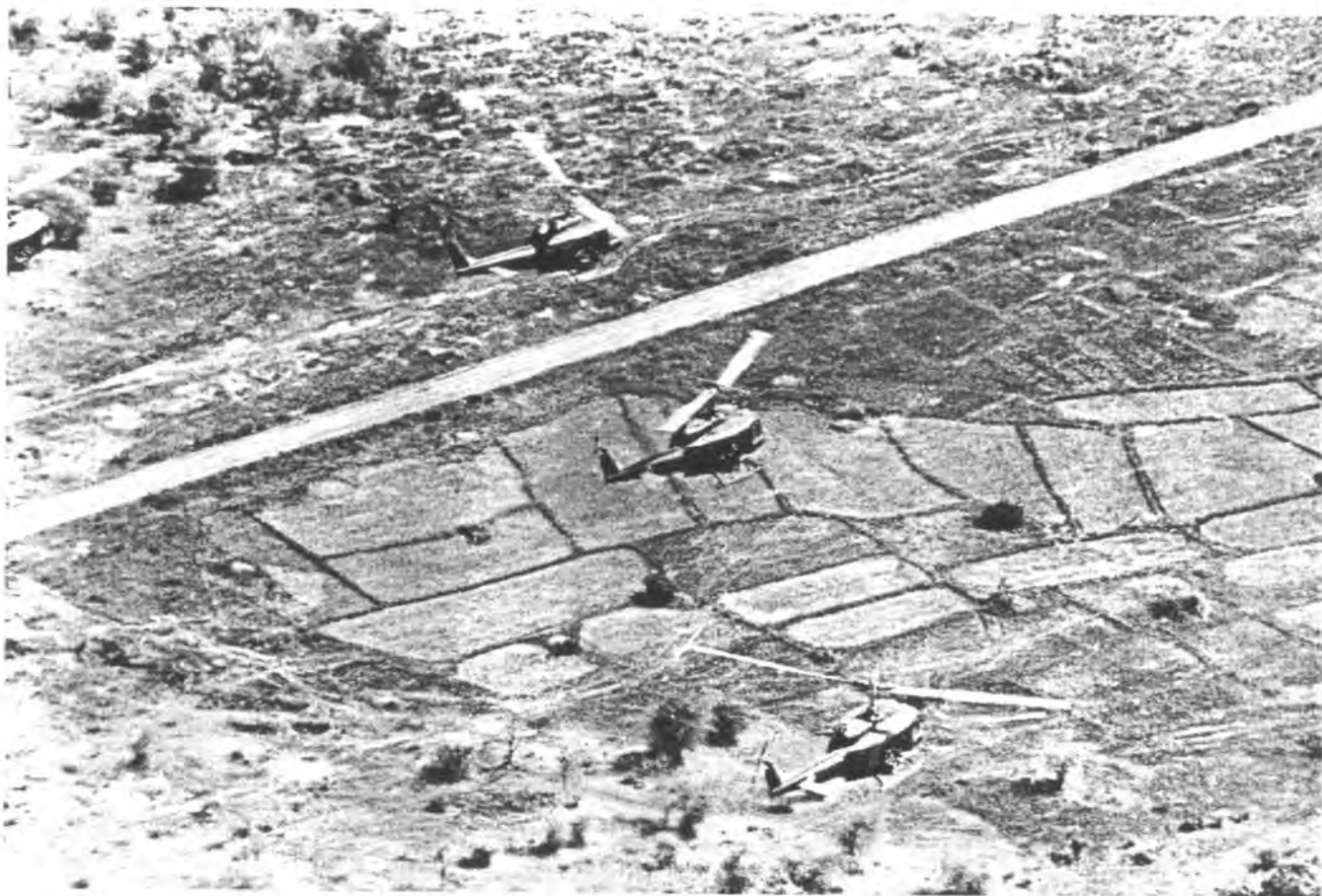
The 135th AHC again changed bases in November when the company moved to Camp Bearcat, a large Thai Army base 25 kilometres south east of Saigon. The move to Bearcat meant the company would be operating almost exclusively in the Mekong Delta Region (4 Corps area) of South Vietnam. The Delta was an area of intense enemy activity and consequently fraught with danger for the American and Australian helicopter crews and their infantry passengers.

The 135th AHC's new base was subject to regular and sometimes intense mortar attacks after dark although casualties and damage were usually slight.

In an attempt to discourage these attacks, the gunship platoon held two gunships on 'counter mortar alert' each night. The helicopters were rigged for



Lt A Casadio checking the minigun and rocket pod on his helicopter prior to another mission. (ANAM)



Hueys on a troop insertion in the Delta. (ANAM)

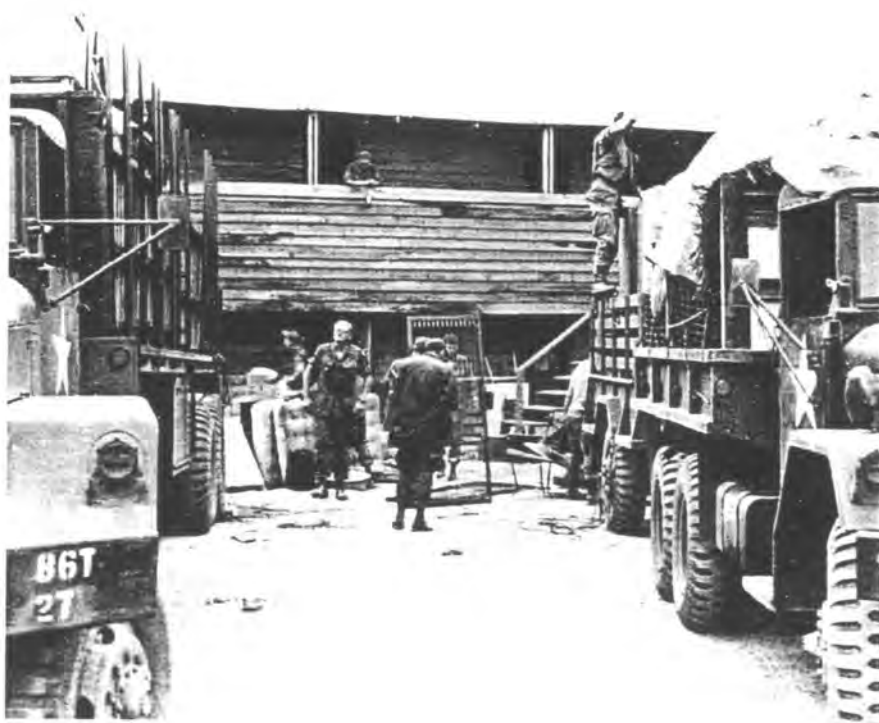
immediate takeoff and their crews slept nearby, fully clothed.

When an attack began the Hueys could be airborne within minutes, searching for and attacking the enemy positions long before ground forces could arrive in the area.

Despite these efforts, the mortar attacks continued all too frequently, an indication that the threat of the gunships did not wholly deter the Viet Cong.

On January 3 1969 Sub Lt A J Huelin and his three man American crew were killed when their Huey struck high voltage power lines near Saigon and exploded. Weather conditions at the time were deplorable, but the crew had been reluctant to abandon its mission. Prior to his death, Huelin had been instrumental in rescuing a downed crew under intense fire in Kien Hoa Province.

Lt TF Supple's Huey was badly damaged by ground fire on February 2 while supporting ground forces in Vinh Long Province. After a skillful forced landing the crew (which included Sub Lt Symons) was set upon by the Viet Cong who were held at bay with small arms and the helicopter's machine guns. After a very eventful running gun fight through the rice paddies, the downed



Building NCOs barracks at Camp Bearcat, 1969. (ANAM)

aviators were rescued under intense automatic weapon fire by another helicopter flown by Sub Lt M A Perrot.

Perrot was himself in trouble on August 9 when his helicopter suffered an engine failure shortly after takeoff. With only seconds to react, he made a masterful forced landing into a very small clearing. The crew and ten ARVN passengers escaped injury in what amounted to an exceptional feat of airmanship. The downed Huey was later recovered by a large Chinook helicopter. But, while hovering at Blackhorse, the Chinook accidentally dropped the Huey from five metres and it was destroyed.

The booby trapping of landing zones with land mines and other explosive devices was another hazard faced by helicopter crews in Vietnam. On one occasion, during the first contingent's tour of duty, a company helicopter had

its nose blown off in a booby trapped landing zone.

In another incident of this nature, Sub Lt R J Kyle's Huey had just put down in a landing zone during an assault landing when a mine detonated directly underneath it. Serious damage resulted and one of the crew was badly wounded. Kyle kept the crippled Huey airborne long enough to reach a secure area from which both the crew and helicopter were later recovered.

Another gunship was lost on May 31 during a heavy contact south west of Long Dinh. The helicopter, in which LACMNE Shipp was a gunner, crashed and burned after being hit by ground fire. There were no survivors. The crews of accompanying gunships observed Shipp firing his machine gun until the moment of impact.

Despite its own mounting losses the 135th AHC's gunship platoon contin-

ued to inflict heavy casualties on the Viet Cong. In a single flight soon after the loss of Shipp's helicopter, a gunship captained by an RANHFV pilot, killed at least 30 enemy troops.

Third Contingent

August was just another month of combat operations for the 135th AHC but with the departure of 25,000 American ground troops, the month was a milestone in the war. 'Vietnamisation' – the training and re-equipping of South Vietnam's armed forces so that they could take over the brunt of the fighting – was greatly intensified.

In September, the third contingent, under the command of Lt Cdr D D Farthing, began to arrive in South Vietnam and after handing over the previous group departed for less arduous duties in Australia.

During its tour of duty, the second



American, Australian and Vietnamese officers confer prior to a troop insertion of the 18th (ARVN) Division in the Delta. (ANAM)

contingent's pilots flew some 9000 hours out of a total 35,900 for the 135th AHC's 72 pilots. Four navy pilots were shot down and six engine failures were shared by the remainder.

The company as a whole had 12 helicopters destroyed and a further 160 damaged. With an average of 23 Hueys in the company it worked out that every helicopter had been damaged over seven times.

Company losses for the tour were 13 killed (including Sub Lt Huelin and LAC Shipp) and 23 wounded (including Sub Lt W E Symons, Ldg Seaman J A Shepard and Naval Airman CC St Clair). On the positive side 233,000 troops were lifted and 431 Viet Cong were killed by the gunship platoon.

The maintenance platoon's work was equally impressive – if less spectacular – its personnel having changed 114 engines and nearly 60 main rotors amongst their other tasks.

Sub Lt R T Giffen, a 22 year old South Australian, was flying in a gunship which was damaged by ground fire near Cai Be on December 1. The Huey took 11 hits, one of which tore into the Australian's left leg before carrying through

and injuring his right leg. The naval aviator's wounds were so extensive that he was evacuated to Australia.

On December 10 Lt R T Marum suffered a hydraulic failure while taking off from Trai Bai airfield in a brand new Huey. A successful forced landing was made on the main runway, without damage to the helicopter.

"We had just hopped out of the helo when I heard a loud roar", recalled Marum. "I looked over my shoulder and to my horror, saw a C-123 (transport) racing down the strip towards us." The crew scattered as "with a sickening rending of metal the two aircraft collided. The momentum of the C-123 pushed the Huey off the strip and both machines ended up as a mass of twisted metal within the confines of the base bomb dump". Fortunately there was no fire and neither crew was injured in the accident although both aircraft were written off.

In another incident involving Lt Marum on January 22 1970, the helicopter he was flying took ground fire while delivering ammunition into a 'hot' landing zone and sustained multiple hits. One bullet penetrated the floor of the cock-

pit and tore into Marum's left leg, before exiting and wounding his left hand. The bullet's upwards flight was only arrested when it struck the hapless aviator in the chest. No further injury was caused to him however, as he had taken the precaution of wearing his 'chicken plate' body armour. Marum's copilot landed the damaged Huey in a nearby fire support base. The Australian was 'dustoffed' to hospital.

Lt Marum was one of the third contingent's luckiest aviators. By the end of his tour of duty his helicopters were hit on no fewer than 11 occasions. On one of these a bullet ricocheted off his flying helmet, without injuring him. On another mission one of the Australian's US Army door gunners (a boy of only 19) was killed by ground fire.

The increasing number of Hueys damaged by ground fire from December 1969 and into 1970 was attributed to the enemy's successful infiltration of North Vietnamese troops into the Delta. The presence of these well trained regular soldiers was quickly felt. Lt Cdr Farthing noted: "The enemy is more accurate in its fire than it used to be ... we used to catch most of the fire in the

135th AHC Huey over Vung Tau. (ANAM)



rear part of the aircraft. Nowadays they have learned to put their fire into the forward sections".*

The enemy's strong reaction to the 135th AHC's air operations was echoed in its mortar attacks against Bearcat. During one bombardment in March, several company personnel were wounded (none from the RANHFV) and at least one helicopter was damaged. Thai Army units at the camp also suffered casualties and damage in the attack.

Lt D B Gibson received serious multiple wounds on March 6 when his helicopter was blown up in a booby trapped landing zone by a 105mm artillery shell. Two ARVN soldiers died in the blast, which resulted in the naval aviator being evacuated to Australia.

In a successful action on the same day, 30 Viet Cong were killed by the gunship platoon. Some of the gunships were damaged in the fight and one, captained by Sub Lt Mayo, had a gunner badly wounded.

Later in the month Sub Lt E K Wile's helicopter was forced down by ground fire near the village of Mo Cay. On the ground the downed crew was attacked by the enemy. But as had occurred in other similar incidents, the aviators fought back with determination and skill, inflicting casualties on the enemy before being picked up by another helicopter.

March 1970 also saw a large South Vietnamese force cross the border into Cambodia to destroy communist sanctuaries in that country. The 135th AHC was one of the aviation units designated to support the ground troops during the push.

Clearly the use of the Australian component in this controversial campaign would be a gross (and more importantly, a public) violation of the Three Government Agreement regarding the employment of Australian forces outside of South Vietnam.

This fact was recognised by both the company commander, Major W D Alexander and Lt Cdr Farthing. As a result the navy men reluctantly stayed at Bearcat while the rest of the company went to fight in Cambodia. Unfortunately, as the RANHFV pilots and maintainers filled so many key positions within the 135th AHC, the Company was unable to operate effectively and was quickly withdrawn from the campaign and returned to Bearcat.

Perry Decorated

On May 18 1970 Sub Lt A C Perry earned the award of an American Silver Star when he led numerous assault landings against very heavy enemy op-



Lucky escape for Leading Aircrewman McIntyre. He is seen here showing an American soldier his now unserviceable flying helmet. (ANAM)

position in Kien Hoa Province. Long Thuan Village had been overrun by the enemy and a flight of Hueys led by Lt Marum was given the mission of inserting blocking forces and reinforcing the troops in contact. Early in the action, Lt Marum's helicopter was forced down by ground fire. Sub Lt Perry, a 21 years old Tasmanian, was not programmed for this mission but was airborne on another task when he offered to take the number one position.

He led a group of nine aircraft to the landing zone and began taking heavy machine gun fire a kilometre and a half from the landing point.

"Normally you don't get it until you are almost there" he said.

"We took our first hit at about 500 feet. It came in under the seat. Then, just before we hit the ground, a bullet came through the windshield and I felt blood on my face.

"The troops jumped out from my side and they all fell over - dead - from a heavy machine gun. A piece of shrapnel came off the pedals and hit me on the foot. By this time I was sure I was in something of a state of disrepair. We took six more hits in the cockpit", he said.

He discovered later that he was suffering only slight cuts from broken glass and had a bruised foot. Later that night he took part in three more troop land-

ings, despite the fact that his cockpit instruments were no longer functioning.*

Prior to this battle, Perry had established a reputation as one of the most daring pilots in the company. His former platoon commander wryly recalled: "He was a most unlucky pilot who, on several occasions, returned to base with his helicopter chin windows shattered by 'bird strikes'. Just how branches and foliage came to be lodged where the windows used to be could not be explained, but I always had a suspicion that the birds were sitting in the tops of trees at the time of the 'bird strikes'."

In another fierce action on July 2 1970, the enemy bitterly contested assault landings made by the company. Apart from the usual small arms and machine gun fire, the landing zone also came under a sharp mortar bombardment, which fortunately failed to damage the helicopters. The South Vietnamese soldiers were not so lucky and suffered some losses to this fire. Nonetheless, by hard fighting and sheer determination they eventually gained the upper hand and forced the enemy out of the area. The gunship platoon also achieved notable success in July. Early in the month Sub Lt G F Cooper's crew killed 26 enemy and a few days later another 30 were claimed.

New Base

The 135th AHC again changed bases in September, this time to Dong Tam in Dinh Tuong Province. The move brought the company closer still to its operational area in the Delta.

Due to a shortage of vehicles within the company, a Thai Army truck was 'borrowed' to facilitate the move and repainted in US Army colours. On the day that the move was scheduled to take place, the said truck was being loaded with Orderly Room furniture and records, when a jeep with two angry Thai MPs appeared at the scene demanding that their truck be returned. The Australians and Americans were about to argue the point when one MP produced a machine gun which he 'locked and loaded' before pointing it in their direction. The vehicle was handed back without another word!

Another feature of the move to Dong Tam was the dismantling and reinstallation of the company's septic flush toilet system. This toilet system was the envy of the US Army in Vietnam.

Prior to the installation of the Australian's septic system, toilet facilities at Bearcat had consisted of 44 gallon drums cut in half, with a plank across the middle. When full, the contents were burnt with oil – a process which

created a sickening odour. Because of the method of waste disposal, the old toilets were entirely open and without privacy. No wonder that the Australian toilets were so popular!

Almost on the heels of this move arrived Lt Cdr James with the fourth (and final) contingent of the RANHFV. As quickly as could be arranged the time expired sailors left for Australia.

As with the previous three contingents, the eight pilots in the fourth contingent were initially rated as second pilots (despite their considerable experience) for 300 flying hours or three months – whichever came first. On completing this probationary period, captaincy was granted.

Recalling that important first combat mission, Lt J C Buchannan commented: "My first operational flight after arriving in Vietnam was to accompany the Maintenance Officer to Vi Tanh where he had to inspect some damaged 'slicks' before they could make the return flight to Dong Tam.

"On the return flight, which was made at dusk and then in darkness, it seemed we took fire from every treeline we crossed. This included one burst of 50 calibre fire, the tracer glow of which appeared as big as basketballs to my very impressionable young eyes.

"After about an hour of terror we regained the relative safety of the base, but as we crossed the perimeter one of the guards fired off a magazine of ammunition to welcome us back. I was quite ready to go home to Australia after that first flight."

On December 3 1970 the 135th AHC's gunship platoon was called out at very short notice when the village of Lau Ba was attacked by a large enemy force. The South Vietnamese troops who formed the garrison requested air support but in spite of the prompt arrival of the gunships, Lau Ba was overrun. The enemy had already left the village when the gunships arrived and only one enemy soldier was killed.

The next day saw an act of flying skill by Buchannan and his crew which lifted the spirits of the company after the disappointments of the previous day's combat. Of this incident Lt Buchannan's Distinguished Flying Cross citation provides the following details:

"On December 4 1970, in the U-Minh Forest he was engaged in the medical evacuation of a wounded crew member from a South Vietnamese Government patrol boat when the group came under heavy attack.

"Another patrol boat, 50 metres away, exploded under a direct hit by a rocket.



In a cloud of dust 2nd Platoon Hueys takeoff on another troop insertion. Australian and American maintainers watch the choppers depart. (ANAM)

"Realising that the boat with which he was operating was disabled and drifting towards the enemy held shore, Lieutenant Buchanan hooked the skids of his aircraft onto the boat's superstructure and towed it to a safe area although he was still receiving the heavy automatic weapons and 82mm mortar fire."

In all, Lt Buchanan, the commander of the second platoon, completed 840 flying hours and had his helicopter damaged by ground fire on 20 occasions before completing his tour of duty.

On January 16 1971 a helicopter in which Naval Airman J V Shaw was on board took several hits and crashed while evacuating casualties in the Seven Mountains area. The helicopter's US Army pilot was killed in the incident, however the remaining crewmen survived a night in the jungle and were rescued the next day.

Winding Down

Under considerable pressure at home and abroad, the United States accelerated its troop withdrawal and by late

1971 fewer than 200,000 American soldiers remained. 'Vietnamisation' was well in hand and the South Vietnamese Army had been expanded from 250,000 men in 1964 to 516,000 men in 1971. Included in this expansion programme were a number of assault helicopter squadrons which were formed during the year.

While the South Vietnamese forces were still not fully self sufficient it was felt that, with the continued presence of American airpower (which Pentagon planners assumed would be available to the South Vietnamese long after the final ground troop withdrawal), the South could defend itself indefinitely.

Due to the growing unpopularity of the war at home, the Australian Government was also keen to reduce its forces and consequently the fourth contingent's tour of duty was cut short when the naval aviators were advised that they would be withdrawn from South Vietnam. As their return would not affect the operations of 1 ATF it was logical that the RANHFV should be one of the first Australian units to leave the

war zone. Flying and maintenance work for the RANHFV ceased on June 8 and the Australians departed on June 12. During their shorter than usual tour of duty those flying with the fourth contingent still managed to complete several hundred flying hours each.

In Vietnam the four contingents of the RANHFV earned a reputation for skill and bravery which was second to none. For the most part the naval aviators operated in areas of intense enemy activity, the result being that the unit suffered proportionately the heaviest battle casualties of any Australian aviation unit in the Vietnam War.

On returning to Australia the RANHFV disbanded and its personnel were posted throughout the Fleet Air Arm. The RANHFV's parent unit, 723 Squadron, was later awarded the battle honour 'Vietnam 1967-1971' - A tribute to those who served with such distinction.

Footnote:

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