



The Machine Gunners
of
B Company 2 RAR
and the
135AHC 'Emus'

In late November 1967 the first two of nine Machine Gunners from Bravo Company, 2 RAR were unofficially seconded to the US Army's 135 Assault Helicopter Company. This unit, known as 'The EMUs', was the home of the RAN Helicopter Flight Vietnam. The RANHFV was a detachment of Australian naval aircrew, helicopter maintainers and support personnel which was integrated with the US Army. The B Coy secondment was the result of collaboration between Lieutenant Commander Pat Vickers RAN (KIA 22Feb68) 2i/c of the HFV and Platoon Leader 1st Platoon 135AHC and Major Carter CO B Coy 2 RAR. The aim of the secondment was to assist the 135th maintain the normally high degree of combat readiness that was currently being affected by a temporary shortage of door gunners.

The secondment originally began at the 135AHC base at Vung Tau Airfield but in January 68 the Unit moved to Camp Blackhorse, to the north of Nui Dat, the home of the 11th Armoured Cavalry. The attachment was usually for two to four weeks and lasted until late February 1968. During which time the soldiers were airborne on a daily basis flying both combat and resupply missions into known and suspected Viet Cong locations. The missions usually lasted from dawn to dusk but on a number of occasions they continued well into the night. The resupply missions were considered, by the higher echelon, to be more a rest mission than combat though this was frequently not the case with many sorties being targeted by enemy weapons. Daily flying time ie. airborne time, for these missions averaged about six hours but the work day was generally double that as it involved routine weapons maintenance in addition to helping the helicopter ‘crew chief’ with before and after flight checks and minor maintenance.

Additionally some of these soldiers were involved in night fire fights or perimeter alerts while at Camp Blackhorse.

B Company Machine Gunners

The members involved flew between 40 and 90 hours during their time in the 135th. This number of combat hours ensured each soldier an entitlement to the US Army’s combat flight decoration ‘The Air Medal’



US Army Air Medal

Some of the men were given copies of the necessary official statement of their flight hours to enable them to apply for and be granted the decoration. Unfortunately none of them applied for the medal once they returned to Nui Dat. This omission was probably due to the Australian Government’s attitude to ADF members accepting foreign decorations. Only three soldiers appear to have retained their certificate now making it difficult to gain the required recognition of their entitlement. One soldier, Private Hoger, has with great difficulty and a lapse of about 35 years, been granted The Air Medal. Action is currently underway to obtain the decorations for the other

six men. Unfortunately Privates Mansfield and Pearce have not been nominated for the Air Medal due to bureaucratic problems with the US Embassy in Canberra in that their names were obtained too late to add to the original six nominations.

Each member has also being awarded a 'one off' set of 'Air Gunner' aircrew wings which have been especially approved by the Royal Australian Navy to acknowledge the special efforts by both RAN Fleet Air Arm and Australian Army non aircrew personnel in acting as door-gunners in the Iroquois UH1H helicopters on operational missions with the US Army 135 AHC.

The soldiers involved were:

Private Roland Lee	S/n 1732098	5 Platoon	27Nov67-06Jan68
Private Ralph Hoger	S/n 5714518	4 Platoon	27Dec67-06Jan68
Private William Wearne	S/n 3788527	4 Platoon	07Jan68 -23Jan68
Private Geoff Kingdon	S/n 4411148	5 Platoon	07Jan68 -23Jan68
Private Robert Carmichael	S/n 3789095	4 Platoon	23Jan68-14Feb68
Private Stanley Jaruga	S/n 3788990	4 Platoon	23Jan68-14Feb68
Private Robert Devers	S/n 3789132	5 Platoon	14Feb68-28Feb68
Private David Mansfield	S/n 54937	5/6 Platoon	08Jan68-05Feb68
Private Kerry Pearse	S/n 5411393	4 Platoon	08Jan68-05Feb68

The apparent overlapping of dates is based on the best information available and inconsistencies are unavoidable due to lack of documentation and memory lapses.

Historical First

This secondment of soldiers to act as door gunners in helicopters and the fact that the unit to which they were attached was an airmobile company of the US Army would make it unique in the history of the Australian Army.

Another apparent first for Australian military history also occurred during the soldier's time in the 135th when in February 1968 the first pilot from the Vung Tau based 9 Squadron RAAF, Flt Lt Frank Clough, arrived to commence familiarisation on the 'H' model Iroquois which were replacing the older 'B & D' models in 9 Sqn. This event was unique for in the same period and in all probability in the same aircraft members of all three Australian Services were flying as aircrew, on combat missions, in a US Army Assault Helicopter Company.

Also during this time several US Army and Australian Navy personnel spent some time with B Coy. One of the US soldiers was PFC Dexter 'Skip' Miracle while RANHFV member Petty Officer Aircrewman O'Brian 'Darky' Philips (KIA 21Aug68) also took part in the exchange program. Both of these men participated in operations while with B Coy with their efforts being well received by company members they patrolled with.

A short story on 'Skip' written by B Coy member Rick Brittain is at the end of this article.

The Iroquois

The UH1H model Huey flown by the 135th carried four crew; two pilots, crew-chief /door-gunner and a second door-gunner. The aircraft could carry between 6-8 combat troops or the equivalent in stores. Armament was an M60 machine gun mounted either side of the rear cabin. Ammunition of 2000 rounds per gun was carried allowing continuous fire when needed. This was replenished as needed whenever the helo refuelled.

The M60s that were fitted to the unit's troopships (slicks) were identical to those used by B Coy, although some US gunners were known to put a 'dime' behind the recoil spring to increase the rate of fire. Therefore, little familiarisation on the weapon or on the way it was used was given to the seconded gunners. This oversight resulted in some interesting incidents. (See Stan Jaruga's story below).

We also forgot to mention to these Infantrymen that unlike when they were in the field we had no shortage of ammo and continuous fire was the norm. So on their first combat assault approach to the LZ there was considerable screaming from their pilots to KEEP *x#/ firing.

HFV member Keith (Squizzy) Taylor relates another story on our excessive use of ammunition.

"I well remember an incident which happened when we were returning to barracks from the Vung Tau flight line. The driver picked up a 135th gunship (Taipan) door-gunner who then started to tell us how they had shot up several 'sampans' and how much ammo they had used. A very large B Coy gunner on board, possibly Roly Lee, took exception to this guy's bragging and taking him by the shirt threatened to throw him off the truck for wasting ammo. It was the first time that I had seen a black guy turn white."

Operations

During November 67 the unit suffered their first helo being shot down. It was a gunship which was hit by enemy fire and forced to crash land in the Rung Sat, a Viet Cong controlled area at the mouth of the Mekong River. The crew led by Sub-Lieutenant Tony Casadio (KIA 21Aug68) held off a Viet Cong attack until rescued. The period Dec67 to Feb68 was the start of intense VC activity ie. The 'Tet Offensive'. These seven soldiers soon found that their attachment to the 135th was no 'walk in the park'. Almost from their first mission the helos in which they were flying came under fire.

Shortly thereafter on the 19Dec68 the unit, including Lee and Hoger, was involved in their first night extraction to the north of Binh Hoa where elements of the 191st Light Infantry Brigade were under heavy enemy attack. To make matters worse it was a 'hot' extraction so all the helos showed minimal lighting and were not allowed to use suppression fire arriving and departing the LZ for fear of hitting US troops. Even so the helos transited in and out of the LZ flying beneath heavy artillery fire. Also unlike a normal extraction of troops under fire the helos were required to remain on the ground for an extended period to ensure no troops were left behind. Eventually all troops were extracted without a shot being fired by the enemy. Following a debriefing all pilots considered that they were in more danger from a mid air collision, through not being able to see other helos, then from enemy fire. The following is an extract from the after action report submitted by CO 2/14 Inf Batt.

"The Emu airmobile company's support was the finest ever witnessed by this unit. Under the most adverse possible conditions (darkness, with continuous protective artillery being fired overhead) every man was extracted from the LZ to include all dead and wounded and equipment. The extraction helicopters stayed on the PZ up to 30 minutes at a time until 5 ship loads were filled as men moved out of the jungle. Illumination was rather sporadic, but with complete disregard for their personal safety, the airmobile company turned on their landing lights to identify the PZ and land. When 5 ship loads were filled, the lift would take off to be immediately followed by another 5 ship lift. After completion of the extraction the airmobile company's

gunships hovered over the PZ and searched the area with their landing lights to ensure that all personnel had been extracted. This unit will never forget the fantastic bravery and professional competence of Commander Ralph of the Royal Australian Navy who led the Emu Airmobile Company on their most difficult mission.”

On the 08Jan68 Kingdon and Wearne were involved in a “hot” insertion with 9th Division troops when two company helos were shot down and six others also being hit. It was during this mission Leut Bruce Crawford RAN was awarded “The Distinguished Service Cross” for his leadership and heroism whilst under intense enemy fire. (See below for further insight into this mission.)

Then on the 08Feb68 Carmichael and Jaruga were in action during another ‘hot’ insertion the 135th suffered their first fatalities when the ‘B’ flight leader’s helo was hit by enemy fire and crashed killing all four crew. Once again eight of the ten ‘slicks’ were hit including two destroyed. Carmichael’s helo was one of those hit with one bullet striking the M60 he was firing at the time.

Bob Devers was airborne on 22Feb68 when the lead helo, climbing out from an LZ, was hit by a lone bullet fatally wounding the pilot Pat Vickers. This was the HFV’s first casualty.

Although not mentioned above there were many more ‘hot and hairy’ missions however specifics are not as well documented or remembered.

During their period with the 135th the B Coy soldiers flew many combat assaults carrying US, Australian and Republic of Vietnam troops. All nine soldiers were in helicopters hit by enemy fire and it was initially thought that Roly Lee was the only unfortunate one to have been shot down. However, it has since been discovered that Dave Mansfield also had his chopper downed near My Tho during operations with an ARVN Unit in mid January 68.

All crew were recovered unhurt but several ARVN soldiers were WIA/KIA and the helo had to be destroyed at the crash site.

In Their Own Words.

Following are some edited comments made by several members of ‘B Coy’.

Private Ralph Hoger

I’ve one small thing to clear up after I was sent to Vung Tau I remember each day clearly even asking for a day off after 21 days straight. Each day was made up of waking at 03:30 wash and dress, mess at 04:00 walk to chopper 04:45 board and await lift off 05:00. We only returned 24:00 that evening 1 hour clean and check 2 machine guns--mess--bed 01:30. I fail to calculate average 6 hours flying daily. Sounds like a milk run you did! (As mentioned above flying time was often a lot less than work time especially for the crew chief and gunner.)

After 1 hour into my first flight a 105 artillery shell exploded metres in front of us. The chopper banked 90° left and dropped down quickly, then leveled out and we kept on flying. The next quiet event was on a peaceful afternoon quite high up I noticed a change in the rhythm of the engine noise. I spoke to my crew chief who relayed this to the pilot and we landed quickly in a rice paddy. Very quickly a crane chopper appeared and took our machine away. Later on we were told we were lucky we landed as the helo had only 5 more minutes of flying before she would have stopped.

Late one afternoon close to Saigon our slick had landed with USA troops when we were all called together. The officer in charge asked for volunteers to step forward as they required 2 helicopters to go in late in the evening and extract infantrymen who had been in a heavy fire fight and at dusk couldn't walk out. Having stepped forward he came up to me and asked again do you want to volunteer? I said YES! He then explained the mission also stating that no light was to be shown anywhere on the choppers. About 20:30 hrs we took off and 30 minutes later came into a small clearing, the undergrowth, grass was 2 metres tall. I saw 1 infantryman come up to us and I helped him in and as we took off, I returned fire into the tree line. We all returned safely. 48 years later I'm still awaiting the military award he said we would all be mentioned for.

One day we flew down across the Delta transporting a group who were going to deploy an ambush along one of the larger bund (paddy dyke). As we approached a lone V.C. in a small canoe was paddling along when all of a sudden from his oar he fired an RPG at a chopper. He missed! Then from behind the row of choppers came a gun ship which sent a rocket back at him. It didn't miss! Everything above the water just disappeared.

We set the US infantrymen down along the bund from my side of our chopper 3 chaps got off the last one, the machine gunner, heavily loaded & quite small went down off the bund into the water we never saw him surface. So many things happened each day. (It was not unusual in the wet season for troops to step into a hidden bomb crater and possibly drown due to the weight of back packs.)

While I was on my 29 day secondment to the 135 AHC EMUs at Vung Tau I had only 2 days break. During this time I visited Vung Tau and meet my good friend Pte Noel Heard who was my number 2 on the machine gun, we chatted and during the conversation I asked if he would like to take my place and see Vietnam from the air. He jumped at it. We went back to the lines/base that evening and I spoke to the crew chief who was always smiling when we got back late of an evening drinking his can of orange and having a puff. He took 'Heardy' under his wing. Nothing serious happened during the mission. Until this day 48 years later I've disclosed one of those little things that "just happened".

While with the 135th at Vung Tau as a machine gunner, I was informed that they had a problem with the machine guns jamming after a few rounds were fired. I soon found the problem. It was in the ammo boxes attached to the gun mounting, the belt of rounds wouldn't flow freely. The solution to pull them out from the boxes and relay them which loosened them allowing more freedom and flexibility to be pulled up into firing position.

The other surprise I found was when landing with the first lot of US Infantrymen we would fire into the jungle overhead of the troops to keep any enemy down allowing the troops to disembark and move forward. The reverse happened when picking up the last lot of troops we would fire back into the jungle that they came from as the V.C. loved coming in close to the departing troops.

In a lot of the general comments regarding the USA military, one must not forget the logistics of their military nearly 500,000 troops on the ground. However whenever we came across them they always opened their hearts and gave freely. I noticed their faces were all very young and I'm sure they didn't know what challenges lay ahead.

In recollecting my thoughts when I was a door gunner with the 135 Assault Helicopter unit at Vung Tau, I am going back 48 years it's still vivid in my memory an unforgettable experience.

We all look back on it all as an experience and ask often what would have happened had we gone down with a chopper? We surely were blessed!!

Private Geoff Kingdon

In 1967 the 2nd Battalion 2 RAR was sent to Viet Nam and like all other Australian Infantry Battalions over the years, for a 12month operational tour. 2 RAR was there from middle of 1967 - to middle of 1968. During those 12 months, the Battalion lost over 40 men dead, and over 130 wounded, me being one of those. In December 1967, 6 Machine-Gunners of (B Company) 2 RAR, were asked if we would like to volunteer to go to the American 135th Helicopter Company as door-gunners due to a shortage of US gunners. (There were actually seven members attached to the 135th.) We went to the 135th, two at a time, from November 67. Ralph Hoger, 4 Platoon and Roly Lee, 5 Platoon were the first two men that went for about 4 weeks. It was Roly Lee who was the only one of us 6 Gunners that was shot down during our time with 135th. The chopper and crew all survived and were picked up later that day. I also understand that during their time at 135th the choppers of all the other gunners also took enemy hits, luckily without loss.

After 4 weeks, Roly and Ralph came back to 2 RAR, and were replaced by Bill Wearne, 4 Platoon and myself from 5 Platoon. We were both there for about 17 days from January 7th 68.

January 8th was my first flight and little did I realise that it would be the 'hairiest'. What was supposed to be a day spent in the Delta region moving troops of the US 9th Div ended up being a day and a night as the inserted troops came under extreme VC fire. As day turned into night with no letup in our mission one helo was hit by enemy fire on approach to the LZ and crashed inverted. The fight went on till about 5am the next day, most of the choppers were hit though fortunately no lives were lost and only minor injuries were sustained.

In all eight helos (5 troopships & 3 gunships) took hits from the large enemy force. Bill Wearne was also there that day and most likely in one of the other helos that were hit by enemy fire. What made it especially hairy was that during the night insertions and extractions the slicks (troopships) were not permitted to fire for fear of hitting our troops.

I think the US Battalion was 3/39 Battalion and the enemy was 5th VC Regiment. As you can imagine, it was good to get back to Blackhorse the next day, and reflect on what happened, and how lucky we all were to be home.

On January 11th I turned 21 and I spent the day flying combat assaults. When we arrived back at Blackhorse that evening, the Americans put on a bit of a birthday party for me which I will never forget. A cake, 2 cans of Bud beer, then back to work. It was also the evening when on a clearing patrol an 11th Cav. armoured track broke down in jungle close to the base and the ensuing repair racket drew fire from the camp perimeter. So the clearing patrol responded in kind.

(An interesting side note is that the 11th Cav was commanded by Col. Patton, son of General Patton.) The rest of my secondment to the 135th was a bit less exciting but still challenging.

As you can imagine at the time we thought that we were doing our Battalion 2 RAR proud to be asked, as infantry gunners, to volunteer as gunners on assault helicopters of the 135AHC known as the EMU's. It was a new challenge for us and let's face it, for us at the time it was better than jungle fighting at close quarters.

On January 23rd, my time with the 135th ended and I once again returned to our own 2 RAR. Bob Wearne and I were replaced by Stan Jaruga, 4 Platoon, and Bob

Carmichael, 4 Platoon.

We were told by our own Platoon Commander that we did a good job and also from the B Company Commander Maj 'Maps' Carter for a job well done.

Private Bill Wearne

I was a Forward Scout in 4 Platoon when I was told that I was going to be a door gunner with a US Army helicopter company. Me!! I had only once before handled an M60 and that was at basic training at Puckapunyal. Now I was seconded as a door gunner with the 135AHC out of Camp Blackhorse about 60 'clicks' north of Nui Dat. I was there from the 07Jan68-23Jan68 and on arrival I was shown my tent and bunk and that was it. I did not realise that another B Coy member was also there and I do not even remember seeing him.

I can always remember my first flight. I was "shit scared" at the time not knowing what was in store for us. We followed the gun ships into the LZ after they blew everything up and we fought our way through the dust and smoke to drop off the 9 Div troops. (This was the 8th Jan.)

On one occasion returning to base at night, a very different experience, we were diverted to pick up some wounded and deceased soldiers. This was very traumatic for me. After loading them on to the helo and about to take off the pilot said to me "door gunner you are in control". That meant that I had to let the pilot know if lift-off was possible as it was pitch black and he could not see the paddy dykes. After this things seemed to settle into place for me. We did a lot of pickups and drop offs with some situations being very tense but others not so bad.

Three weeks later I was back with 4 Platoon 2 RAR and I was glad to be there. On leaving the 135th I was presented with a certificate stating that I had flown 48.3 hrs on combat missions and told that I was entitled to the US Army 'Air Medal'. The secondment was a unique experience and one that I will never forget!

Private Robert Carmichael

I arrived in Camp Blackhorse on the 23Jan68. With me was Stan Jaruga, a fellow 4 Platoon member. From what I can recall the thought of flying for a job instead of walking through sometimes thick jungle was something to look forward to. But, we soon found out that it was indeed "no walk in the park".

Upon arriving at Blackhorse imagine the shock that we got when we found fridges, with alcohol therein, in our tent!!!! Never happen at Nui Dat! The other thing that shocked me was when the next morning the sergeant came in and asked nicely if this serviceman would get up, and he replied that the Sgt could get stuffed. Shit! I thought that it was on here but the Sgt just left the tent. So much for discipline in the US Army!!!! That day went quick with our intro into what had to be done with one's chopper, the do's and don'ts of flying and the very important part of keeping the M60's operational. From there on we were flying!!!!

Some of the memories are:-

1. Our flight sitting on a road waiting, I suppose, to pick up troops from who knows where, when this enormous noise erupted nearby, and over the bank came this very large amphibious hovercraft gunboat, mounted with 50cal machine-guns, and set down right beside us. Christ I thought trust, the USA to come up with this one!
2. Discharging ARVN troops hoping like hell that there was no grenade left on board or that one of them would turn around and that my M60 would have to be put into action!! (This attitude came about due to several incidents where ARVN troops, on disembarking turned around and opened fire on the helo. Live grenades were also a surprise gift on occasions. Thus the unwritten rule if an ARVN soldier turned around pointing his weapon at the helo he was "fair game").
3. Putting 9th Div troops into a hot LZ, while watching bits of the paddy bund flying in all directions. This is 8th Feb. After, I think, our 3rd insertion we took off and from my side I could see a slick a bit higher than us with smoke coming from the motor, the crew chief standing on the skids, as it disappeared overhead, next thing over the radio we heard that it had crashed into the deck. My slick White 5 (I think) was directed to fly above the crash site to see if there were any survivors. There were none! We flew in an anti-clockwise circle so I had no hope of seeing anything except that we were getting closer (or so I thought) to where the artillery were blasting the enemy!! Anyhow we were running low on fuel so we headed back to refuel. On landing beside the pumps, I jump out, slide door forward and notice all these 'bloody' bullet holes in our tail. I ran around the front of the aircraft (had of course disengaged intercom) to grab the crew chief to have a look!!!! Next thing the aircraft shut down. We took the guns off and got a lift back to Blackhorse.
Back at base upon stripping my M60 I found that a bullet had passed between barrel and gas chamber making the gun inoperable, so it became a single shot machine-gun! Funny when you think about it, but at the time quite hairy!!!! Found out later that our aircraft would not have flown much longer as a bullet had shattered one of the bolts holding the tail rotor.
4. being bloody hot on the ground, but when the aircraft gained some altitude it could get bloody cold. OK for the pilots at the front, they didn't have their door open!!!!!!
5. Moving dead GI's from the morgue to the airstrip for their final flight home. I did this at night with Stan J. When we started we took great care to pick up the green body bags gently and place them in our aircraft and the same when taking them off onto the trolleys, but after 2 hours or more "gentle" went out the window but the smell of the dead remained.
6. Became a medivac for one day taking wounded civilians to hospital at Vung Tau. Most of them had been burnt by napalm. One girl was receiving plasma. She was laid out on the seat and guess who held onto the bottle? Bloody heavy shit that plasma! Anyhow the flight took some time and half way there girl stops breathing. I inform pilot that I think girl has died. Reply 'OK' you can put the bottle down gunner. Felt like a bloody idiot!!!
7. Crew chief introduces me to the "weed". Have two puffs of pipe and can't stop laughing!!! No more thanks!
8. Arrive back at 2 RAR Nui Dat. On leaving the Boozer that night with can in hand and walking back to tent when a voice says, "What have you got there soldier?" Not at Blackhorse now am I!! "Report to me in the morning soldier"! Result 7 days CB.

Private Stan Jaruga

One day at Nui Dat Rob Carmichael and myself were asked if we wanted to be 'door gunners' in US Army helicopters. We immediately answered in the positive. No more

scrub bashing for three weeks! When we arrived at the 135th the yanks were at first a bit standoffish but we were soon accepted. The Aussie sailors McIntyre (Little Mac), Brooksy etc. took us under their wing and were good company.

My time with the 135 AHC was a blur of frenzied activity as it coincided with the start of the 'Tet Offensive'. We were flying continuous combat assaults mainly with the US 9th Div as well as the 18th and 25th ARVN Divisions. We also did a couple of lifts moving ATF troops to the Bein Hoa /Long Binh complex to interdict the NVA/VC rocket regiments who were attacking bases in the area.

Rob and I flew over 80 hours of combat missions with our only respite being supposedly non combative 'hash and trash' missions throughout 3 Corps. Then we carried everything from senior US officers, POWs and resupplies to the inevitable KIA's. Even so both day and night we regularly came under enemy fire. One highlight was flying into the home of the US 1st Div at Lai Khe and seeing the huge 'Big Red' 1 painted on the airfield.

When I was on my first combat assault no one told me when not to fire the M60. We had two flights of 9th Div troops going into an LZ in the Delta and when the pilot said 'open fire' I let go with about 80 rounds and every chopper in the vicinity yelled 'CEASE FIRE' Nobody had told me not to fire from the middle of a flight!

Rob and my 'cherries' were busted on the 08Feb68 when taking 9Div troops into an LZ in the Delta. We flew into a 'shit storm' of incoming. The lead chopper was hit and crashed killing all four crew. Rob later found that his chopper took numerous AK47 hits including one to his M60. I fired nearly all my rounds and 'shit' myself. It was a sad time for the 135th and it made me think of my mates back at Nui Dat hoping they were OK.

Another 9th Div mission involved an emergency night insertion. We loaded the troops and flew 'flat chat' bringing in reinforcements as the first insertion had been ambushed by at least a battalion of VC. We had to fly through the incoming artillery fire with my arse puckered up as tight as could be.

Flying at night time the red and green tracer and the explosions are spectacular but knowing that there is DEATH below takes the shine off it!

That night while we refuelled I was told to report to the Command and Control (C&C) chopper which carried the battalion commander. The C&C ship controlled the infantry, air, artillery and the spotter plane. We flew back to the AO and I reckon there was more green (enemy) than red (friendly) tracer flying around. We were circling the battle zone when I saw these big white balls (50 cal) heading for us. I yelled at the pilot to douse our lights as they had us bracketed. F#@* they missed! One 'hash and trash' mission Rob and I were on a multi - aircraft lift taking US KIAs from Fire Support Bases (FSB) to the morgue at Long Binh. This unnerved both of us and really brought home how bad the Tet Offensive was in terms of non stop action and combat losses.

My chopper was then tasked to deliver urgent re-supply to a FSB under a ferocious attack from VC. When we landed I jumped out and started unloading when the crew chief grabbed me and said 'let's go'. He said that the VC were bracketing our chopper. As we were lifting off a mortar round hit five meters from where we were. We received only minor damage.

On another sortie loaded with ARVN troops we were ambushed in the LZ. We took several hits while other choppers sustained serious damage. It was widely believed that the ARVN was heavily infiltrated at all levels by the VC and I for one concur as it appeared the VC knew we were coming.

Some time during Tet Blackhorse had a 'red alert' which meant we had VC in the wire. A US officer ran to me and told me that as I was a 'grunt' I should deploy our blokes as I saw fit. I told everyone to get as much ammo as possible and when we got to the defensive perimeter we had 11 M60s with 2000 rounds each. That's a lot of fire power in any ones language. Thank Christ it was a false alarm!

While we were on exchange some of the 135th Yanks went to Nui Dat and participated in combat ops with B Coy 2 RAR. They were rapt to be on patrol with the Aussies as were we sitting down and firing a M60 machine gun. The whole experience was mind blowing; it delivered to Rob and me a sense of elitism. It produced a profound effect on the way we saw the war and of the battles we witnessed. What it brought home to us was the waste of lives. Being with the 135 AHC was unbelievable and to all our mates who partook in being door gunners, all I can say is "CLEAR RIGHT".

Private Robert Devers

I was the last of the Company to be seconded to the 135th. The death of Pat Vickers probably was the reason that the secondment was terminated. The assignment involved a day on troop delivery (combat assaults) into contact missions and later retrieval of the same troops. While on alternate days we flew outpost delivery duties flying to many different locations for pickup/delivery supplies, senior personal and other ancillary items. Many of the days on troop delivery produced some hairy situations with cover fire required by me as a gunner before landing, then over the heads of the US soldiers as we left them. I distinctly remember the M60 I had kept jamming and frustrated the hell out of me and left us open as a target on my side of the chopper. Attempts to get a replacement M60 were futile and all I could do was service the gun the very best I could after the days flying. The US troops were very friendly but had very different tactics in the field. What with mosquito bottles in their helmets and at times guns slung over their shoulders. We would have our heads ripped off for doing just that!

On one outpost mission I was required to fire at an enemy person fleeing from a village which I think resulted in either a wounding or was a fatal. Not sure of the end result, but the brass were happy with the outcome. In all the assignment made me very much appreciate the disciplined approach of our (RAR) tactics in patrolling and also made me appreciate that we in fact had officers that did care about our survival through our campaign, Some of the rides on the choppers were unbelievable, I remember one day we had to fly low over a river to avoid enemy sniper fire and that ride at the speed we were at was the most fantastic ride ever, being only feet from the water and weaving along the river. I remember it was the first time I saw anyone on marijuana in the lines as one of the US guys would laugh his head off at anything even if you stuck your finger in the air! In all an experience I appreciated, but pleased to see the base camp at night, and even more pleased to see my Aussie diggers on return to Nui Dat.

Private David Mansfield

We took over from Roly Lee so would have gone to Blackhorse on the 6th or 7th Jan. The EMU's were based at Blackhorse for my period of service

I am almost sure that both of us were posted to 1Platoon. I flew every day except for one, the day after being shot down. That occurred in the Delta close to MyTho. We were flying in support of an ARVN unit, dropping them off in a rice paddy which turned out to be a hot lz. This would have occurred around mid January 68. The 2 pilots and crew chief were all American. We walked away OK but the Sth Viets weren't so lucky suffering GSW and also numerous other injuries. The Huey finished up on it's roof and I heard later that it was too badly damaged for recovery and was destroyed in situ. I was interviewed by the unit XO. We returned to our company on either the 5th or 6th Feb 68. I'm pretty sure of that date due to the fact my 21st was 8Feb and I had been back for 1 or 2 days.

Conclusion

The secondment, sanctioned or not, of these nine brave volunteers from B Company 2 RAR to the 135AHC was an historical event in the annals of the Australian Military. They left the relative security of their familiar tactics and operations for a vastly different style of the same operations. They freely gave their time and experience to help out their US Army comrades when it was needed while admitting that the experience left them with a better understanding of the war.

Lieutenant Commander Patrick Vickers and Major Carter both put their careers on the line by setting up this exchange and from reading the soldiers own tales of the missions undertaken during the exchange they were probably lucky that all nine escaped with nothing more than shattered nerves and good stories.

All nine of these soldiers achieved the required minimum hours for the award of the US Army Air Medal and their dedication to the task certainly merits due consideration. One can only hope that their efforts will be rewarded in the not too distant future.

During 2015 steps were taken by the RAN Fleet Air Arm to recognise the efforts of all the non-aircrew door-gunners, both Navy & Army, by awarding them special set of wings and a citation applauding their dedication and valour.

These wings and citations have now been presented to the 49 sailors and soldiers or NOK.

An additional privilege recently granted to the nine soldiers was the placing of an individual bronze plaque on the 'Wall of Service' at HMAS Albatross, the home of the RAN Fleet Air Arm Nowra NSW.

The Wall is dedicated to those who served with a FAA unit in war or peace and incorporates plaques from all three Australian Defence Arms as well as members of both the Royal Navy and the United States Navy who have swerved in the RANFAA.



ROYAL AUSTRALIAN NAVY HELICOPTER FLIGHT VIETNAM GUNNER'S WINGS



Able Seaman AN Other – R123456

In recognition of his Service while participating in sustained aerial flight in support of allied combat ground forces in the Republic of South Vietnam. From September 1969 to October 1970, as a member of the Third Contingent, he participated in aerial missions over hostile territory to support operations against communist aggression. During these flights, conducted by day and night in fair weather and foul, he displayed a high order of air discipline and acted in accordance with the best traditions of military service in a role for which he volunteered to contribute to the accomplishment of the tasked mission, in spite of the hazards inherent in repeated aerial flights over hostile territory. By his professionalism and devotion to duty, he has brought great credit upon himself, Australia and the Royal Australian Navy.

VEB Di Pietro, CSC
Commodore, RAN
Commander Fleet Air Arm

19 January 2016

