



RAAF EXPERIENCE IN COMBAT SAR

In Australian military tradition, coming to the aid of your comrades, especially under combat conditions, ranks a high priority and contributes to esprit de corps. Among World War I aviators, this tradition took the form of pilots landing their aircraft alongside those of fellow pilots who had been shot down, in an attempt to rescue them. Some succeeded gloriously; some failed. In Palestine on 20 March 1917, LT Frank McNamara of No 1 Squadron AFC landed his Martinsyde G100 in the desert, rescued his squadron mate from charging Turkish cavalry and was awarded the Victoria Cross. Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR) has evolved and improved way beyond the ad hoc methods used in World War I. These are some of the examples of RAAF experience in CSAR.



The incident for which Lieutenant F.H. McNamara was awarded the VC

In World War II, the RAAF started to develop its CSAR capability by forming units that specialised in this role. No 1 Rescue Flight (later renamed No 1 Rescue and Communication Squadron, and even later No 8 Communications Unit) was located at Goodenough Island in November 1942, with detachments at various Allied bases around New Guinea. This unit used Walrus, Dornier Do-24 and Catalina flying boats in the CSAR role.

From December 1944, the number of units specialising in CSAR greatly increased. Air-Sea Rescue Flights (ASRFs) were formed at Madang, Darwin, Cairns and at Morotai Island, Netherlands East Indies (NEI). Each was equipped with at least two Catalina aircraft. Some of these units were also equipped with motor launches that could be used to recover personnel when alighting on the water was not possible.

On 31 March 1945, Beaufighters from 31 SQN were attacking Japanese targets in the Haroeke Straits near Ambon, NEI. The crew of one aircraft bailed out and climbed into a dinghy in the middle of the strait. Approaching to alight near the survivors, a Catalina of 113 ASRF was met with groundfire from both sides of the strait. Covering fire from both of the Catalina's blister guns and from two other Beaufighters kept the enemy occupied long enough for the flying boat to land, recover the Beaufighter crew and take off again. The Catalina recovered to Morotai, damaged by gunfire and with one wounded crewmember.

By April 1945, CSAR had evolved to the point where it was part of the planning of an air operation. Air-Sea Rescue Catalinas provided CSAR cover for many of the bombing missions flown by RAAF aircraft as part of Operation *Oboe 1* – the amphibious landings at Tarakan, Borneo. In these operations, the Catalina held in a safe area within visual range of the target, observed the attack and provided assistance to any of the attacking aircraft in distress.

In the Korean War, CSAR was generally provided by helicopters flown by the American services. At least two RAAF pilots were recovered by this method. On 15 March 1951, 77 SQN Mustangs were attacking North Korean forces along the north bank of the Han River, while the UN forces held the south bank. WOFF Charles Howe's aircraft was struck by groundfire and began to lose power. He crash-landed his aircraft on an island in the middle of the Han River, which was not occupied by either side at the time. He was rescued shortly after by an American helicopter.

On 20 March 1951, two 77 SQN Mustangs were patrolling north of Seoul when SGT Cecil Sly's cockpit began to fill with smoke and the engine lost power. Sly bailed out at low level but, once on the ground, found himself surrounded by well dug-in Chinese troops. His section leader in the other aircraft called for more Mustangs to provide a protective ring of fire around the RAAF pilot, who had taken cover in a dry river bed near his crashed aircraft. A US helicopter attempted a rescue about half an hour later, but was driven off by the intensity of the enemy fire. More Mustangs came on the scene, dropping napalm on the area where most of the groundfire was coming from. The pilot of a US T-6 observation aircraft, who was directing the close air support, was wounded by groundfire and had to return to base. After Sly had been on the ground for about two hours, a second rescue

helicopter flew in at low level, picked him up and flew to a major military airfield.

During the Korean War, six RAAF pilots successfully abandoned their aircraft over enemy territory but were captured. The rescues attempted were not successful because either the location of the downed pilot was unknown, or the pilot was captured within minutes of landing.

The RAN, however, had better luck with CSAR. In October 1951, HMAS *Sydney II* had embarked a US Navy Sikorsky S-51 helicopter and crew to provide CSAR services. On 26 October, five RAN Fairey Fireflies conducted a strike on a railway tunnel when one of the aircraft was hit by anti-aircraft fire and force-landed in a paddy field. Enemy forces surrounded the two-man crew but were kept at a distance by strafing fire from the remaining four Fireflies, three RAN Sea Furys plus two 77 SQN Meteors. Seventy minutes after leaving *Sydney*, the rescue helicopter landed, under a hail of bullets, close to the two survivors and extracted them to the safety of Kimpo, the nearest military airfield.

In the Vietnam War, CSAR for RAAF operations was again generally provided by US services. An example of this was in March 1971 when Canberra A84-228 was struck by a surface-to-air missile over South Vietnam. The pilot and navigator successfully ejected and landed in an area of mountainous jungle held by the Viet Cong. After spending the night hidden in the jungle, both crewmembers were located and winched from the jungle by a USAF Iroquois which homed onto their emergency radio beacons.



Minister for Defence John Gorton visiting crew of Canberra A84-228 in hospital at Vung Tau

In a war with many helicopter-borne forces, CSAR was often provided by friendly aircraft that happened to be in the area. An example of this occurred in February 1970, when FLTLT Chris Langton was flying a USAF OV-10 Bronco aircraft on a Forward Air Control (FAC) mission near the Cambodian border. His mission was to coordinate the air support for the helicopter extraction of a US Army patrol that was in close contact with communist forces. When the controls of his aircraft froze, FLTLT Langton was forced to eject at low level. While some A-37 Dragonfly aircraft put down covering fire to pin the enemy down, a LOH-6 helicopter that had been part of FLTLT Langton's support team, picked him up. Within seconds, groundfire struck the engine and the aircraft crash-landed in the jungle. Unhurt, the crews of both aircraft remained hidden in the undergrowth for 20 minutes until a rescue Iroquois winched them to safety.

The Air Power Manual (AAP 1000-D) states: 'The Air Force does not have a dedicated SAR capability, and contributes to Joint Personnel Recovery by providing air power support to other agencies and forces conducting recovery operations. In CSAR, the Air Force can contribute C2, ISR and air operations to protect rescue forces from enemy threats.'

- *Australian airmen have been involved in rescuing personnel trapped in enemy territory since World War I*
- *The experience continued throughout World War II, Korea and Vietnam*
- *The RAAF is required to contribute air power support to personnel recovery efforts following an accident or hostile action*

'In combat operations, aircraft will be shot down.'

- Lieutenant General Charles Horner USAF
Commander Air Force Component,
US Central Command during
Operation Desert Storm

'The professional mastery of Air Force personnel must include the expertise that enables them to conduct effective Joint Personnel Recovery and to act in a manner that facilitates their recovery following an accident or hostile action.'

- AAP 1000-D Air Power Manual, March 2007



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