

PATHFINDER

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HELICOPTER OPERATIONS IN VIETNAM

The Vietnam conflict of 1962-1975 saw the clash of a technologically superior force against an equally determined but unsophisticated enemy. The employment of air assets such as the iconic Bell UH-1 Iroquois series of helicopters to mount airmobile operations on a massive scale changed not only the battlefield in Vietnam, but all future battle-spaces.

The British success in using helicopters to deal with a Communist insurgency in Malaya may have been one of the factors that saw these aircraft so rapidly introduced into the Vietnamese theatre. There were, however, significant differences between the two campaigns. The British used the helicopter as a means, whereas the US in Vietnam used it as an end. In Malaya the overall strategy was to hold ground, while in Vietnam the helicopter took the war to the enemy in no uncertain terms but the ground was never held. American airmobile tactics were underpinned by a grander strategy focussed on world-wide Communism.

To assist their ground forces, the Americans committed close to 50 assault helicopter companies (AHC) with about 1500 Iroquois, or *Hueys* as they were more commonly known, and another 20 or so assault support companies (about 400 CH-47 *Chinook* helicopters) as well as a multitude of other helicopter types. Each AHC comprised 20 lift aircraft (the *Slicks*), 8 gunships (UH-1Cs), and the air mission commander in the Command and Control (C&C) ship with two others for spare and maintenance support. At any one time at the height of the war, about 1000 helicopters would be moving American, Australian, Thai, Korean, Philippino and South Vietnamese troops by company sized groups of 100 or so men, and equipment, from pick up zones to landing zones and back again.

From 1966, the Royal Australian Air Force also provided a helicopter unit to give support to Australian ground troops. The UH-1B, D and later H models operated by No 9 Squadron met most of the requirements of the Australian

Task Force based at Nui Dat, although the RAAF was frequently stretched in finding enough pilots to keep the unit fully manned. This shortage was met by attaching some New Zealand officers to the squadron, and—from February 1968 until April 1969—some Royal Australian Navy pilots as well.



Iroquois helicopters flying over rice paddies

Quite separate to the Navy personnel serving with 9 Squadron was the contribution of the RAN Helicopter Flight Vietnam (RANHFV). From October 1967 the RAN provided a contingent of personnel only (no aircraft) comprising eight pilots, four observers, four aircrewmembers, maintainers and supporting staff—a total of

46 all ranks. This contingent was relieved at yearly intervals, so that ultimately four groups were rotated through by late 1971, when Australian forces were swept up in the general exodus of foreign support for the South Vietnamese regime.

The RANHFV was tucked away within the US Army's 135th AHC, itself part of the huge 1st Aviation Brigade, forming part of that AHC's Experimental Military Unit, inevitably dubbed the EMUs. Initially, the 135th was stationed at Vung Tau (the base used by the RAAF squadron), but later it moved to Blackhorse near Xuan Loc, then Bearcat (north-east of Saigon) and finally Dong Tam in Dinh Tuong province. The Navy flight was fully integrated into the organisation of the 135th AHC. The officer in command of the RANHFV was the Company Executive Officer, and his pilots took C&C, as well as Platoon and Gunship lead positions. Observers went into operations positions at battalion and group level, while the aircrewmembers became gunners and crew chiefs across the AHC.

While not technically 'under command', the RAN personnel inevitably assumed this status whenever they found themselves flying as part of an American crew, in an American aircraft, with US or Vietnamese commanders directing operations. It happened just as often, however, that when flying as C&C or *Slick* or *Gunship* lead, an Australian

found himself in command of a mission involving American and Vietnamese forces.

In these operations the helicopters functioned purely in the trooplift role, taking troops to and from landing zones (LZ) to specifically engage the enemy based on intelligence derived in most cases over the previous evening. If the LZ was 'hot' (with enemy present), it was considered a plus because time had not been wasted in finding the enemy. Support was also generally available from other troops in the pick up areas, with artillery and air strikes available instantly on tap. The helicopters also carried out efficient medivac of injured personnel.



Lieutenant Max Speedy, RAN, at the controls of his aircraft. Flying with the 135th was a far cry from aircraft carrier operations.

AHC flying rates were predicated on 1500 hours per month for the 15 aircraft required every day, but in 1968-69, the 135th AHC flew 3600-4100 hours a month for a yearly total of over 35 000 hours, much the same as all assault companies. The effect of this rate of effort was that in-house maintenance often suffered. The 100-hour inspections had to be done overnight, and repairing battle damage was similarly rushed. The frequency of aircraft losses placed a high strain on the supply chain and meant that replacements were not found quickly. In the 135th the normal complement of 31 helicopters was reduced to 17 in 1969, which meant that providing 15 aircraft every day eventually became difficult. Pre-flight inspections never became merely a matter of course in the company, but if the aircraft could be started, it was generally flown—such was the demand and the response.

The superiority that the US and South Vietnamese forces gained from airmobile deployment of troops produced

formidable successes at the tactical level. Although often won at huge cost, the allied successes were so overwhelming that the North Vietnamese normally withdrew rather than fight to the conclusion of any engagement. The enemy retired to fight another day, while the US and ARVN were airlifted back to their enclaves.

It is inconceivable that this sort of war could be fought again. Over 7000 Hueys went into Vietnam, and of these, 3300 were destroyed through enemy action or accident; nearly 2200 helicopter aircrew were among the 58 000 Americans who lost their lives in the conflict. The 135th AHC lost 13 killed and 22 wounded in action during 1968-69 alone. Overall, the RANHFV lost five killed and had 22 wounded—about the same as the RAAF's much larger No 9 Squadron operating sixteen aircraft.

What are the lessons for today? Helicopters are probably the most effective quick reaction tool in a land force commander's inventory, but they are only a means of taking the fight to the enemy, not an end by themselves. Moreover, using helicopters in situations entailing a high risk of combat means that inevitably there will be losses—possibly heavy losses. Any ADF commander faced with circumstances similar to Vietnam will need to decide the extent to which he can afford to sacrifice airmobility assets in order to achieve his campaign aims.

- *As used in Vietnam, the helicopter provided unprecedented troop mobility and supremacy on the battlefield*
- *The vulnerability of the helicopter to ground fire, demonstrated in Vietnam and currently elsewhere, ensured that gains were won at a high cost*
- *The utility of the helicopter weapon, and its drawbacks, remain the same irrespective of which service owns or operates the aircraft*

"...it is difficult to see how any ground commander can deny himself or be denied of this type of support."

LCDR Neil Ralph, OIC RANHFV, April 1968.



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