

RAAF Helicopter Operations in Vietnam 1966–71

By Mr Martin James

The history of RAAF rotary wing operations in Vietnam 1966-71 can best be described as one of constant improvement. When No 9 Squadron first deployed into Vietnam in June 1966 the unit had the ability to airlift a maximum complement of 40 troops into or out of a secure landing zone. That was of course only if all of the squadron's eight helicopters were available, the weather was good and all of the aircrew were fit to fly. By the time the unit returned to Australia in 1971, they were comfortably capable of conducting a 'company plus' airlift into, or out of, a contested landing zone while concurrently providing gunship and casualty evacuation support to the operation. This could be achieved in marginal weather conditions, at very short notice and across a range of terrain types.

This significant improvement in operational effectiveness was in fact an outward expression of the growth of the rotary wing capability within the RAAF during this period. Not only did the RAAF develop more effective ways and means to provide troop airlifts and logistics support, but it was able to expand the roles performed by helicopters in theatre

to encompass special operations, casualty evacuation (CASEVAC), gunship fire support and information operations.

One lesson that was evident even before combat flying in Vietnam started was that the very few platforms on strength could not be used in direct combat roles due to the lack of armour plating and the paucity of replacement airframes and, more importantly, the limited numbers of replacement aircrews. It was therefore essential that the RAAF husband its rotary wing resources lest they be destroyed in ill-considered operations which would generate unsustainable attrition.



Iroquois gunships and ground crew

Sustainability was an early problem that had to be overcome. In 1966 there were only two dedicated helicopter squadrons in the RAAF, Nos 5 and 9 Squadrons. While No 5 Squadron was responsible for Iroquois operations in

Australia, including SAR and support to peacetime operations; air and ground crew conversion to helicopters was its primary activity. This was vital work, for the graduates of the training programs were essential to sustain personnel rotations into South Vietnam.



Iroquois helicopters over rice paddies

The training at No 5 Squadron could only provide so much of the skills and experience needed. This was especially applicable in progressing pilots through to aircraft captain status and in achieving currency across the expanding roles on which the Iroquois helicopters were being employed. These were skills and experience that could only be gained on active flying duties. For the RAAF from 1966-1971, this meant deployment to Vietnam with No 9 Squadron.

Given No 9 Squadron's high operational tempo, the difficulties in managing aircrew proficiency progression were considerable. However to its credit the unit was able to not only sustain its tasking in direct and indirect support of Vietnam operations, but developed a robust system of progressing junior aircrew to advanced stages of proficiency. Pilots were steadily progressed in stages to qualify as a Combat Co-pilot then on to Combat Captain, Flight Leader and finally to Mission Leader. Later when the No 9 Squadron Iroquois were modified to enable them to be configured as gunships, the proficiencies of Gunship Co-pilot to Gunship Captain to Gunship Flight Leader were also developed, while the proficiencies

required for Mission Leader expanded. Each and every level required the pilot to learn and then demonstrate the skills, knowledge and aptitude needed for that particular proficiency. This development program was integrated with operational tasking, thereby minimising aircraft usage on training flights, thus maintaining high availability for both planned and short notice operational tasking.

The initial deployment to Vietnam was in reality only a minimalist capability. The eight B model Iroquois available to send into theatre had only a limited lift capacity of five equipped troops. In order to meet the Australian Task Force commander's requirements for troop and logistics airlift tasks, it was necessary to enlist the aid of an additional US Army Iroquois and crew for the duty CASEVAC helicopter.

While the RAAF's Iroquois still performed CASEVAC missions, the preference was to use the US Army assigned aircraft as this aircraft was both configured for the role and carried a medical orderly on board. While this arrangement ensured that a casualty would be receiving medical attention as soon as they were loaded on board the helicopter, it did at times create the illusion that the RAAF was reluctant to perform CASEVACs.



No. 9 Squadron flight line

The CASEVAC role was in fact a function No 9 Squadron performed regularly. In the

aftermath of the Battle of Long Tan for instance, seven helicopters of No 9 Squadron launched into darkness to bring out the wounded. While a US helicopter went into the landing zone with its landing lights on, illuminating the wounded, unwounded and the armoured personnel carriers (APCs) to any nearby enemy forces, the No 9 Squadron helicopters flew into the small LZ without lights as ordered by the ground commander. It was a risky procedure in the era before NVGs, with only the residual light showing through the APC's hatches as guidance. However all seven helicopters managed to land and take away the most severely wounded soldiers of 'D' Company.



No. 9 Squadron on a logistics support operation

When the RAAF was able to purchase the larger and more powerful H model Iroquois, it was able to increase the size of the detachment in Vietnam to 16 aircraft. This resulted in an ability to carry greater loads over longer distances. The increase in capability meant that from November 1970 the RAAF was able to take over the role of the duty CASEVAC helicopter for the Australian Task Force on a permanent basis. From June 1966 to May 1971, No 9 Squadron was to perform over 4300 medical evacuations.

The improved performance of the H model Iroquois also meant that the enduring problem of providing fire support on airlift

operations could be addressed through the modification of several of these new platforms as gunships. The development of an indigenous gunship capability was a significant game changer. In the past gunship support was provided by whatever US gunships were available, making the development of air-ground tactics, training and procedures (TTPs) extremely difficult. Once No 9 Squadron was able to conduct both the troop lifts and the fire support 'in house', the ability of Australian forces to develop mutually beneficial TTPs became viable. This ability became particularly evident in special operations conducted in support of the many SAS patrols inserted/extracted by the squadron over the course of the war.

Throughout the Vietnam War, No 9 Squadron worked continually to develop new and innovative TTPs and capability to better support ground operations and to meet Australia's broader intent in Vietnam. From the difficult first months of operations, the RAAF's rotary wing capability matured and developed into a highly effective force manned by professional masters of helicopter operations. Rarely numbering more than 16 airframes the unit flew 237,424 sorties over the course of their five year deployment with an average serviceability rate of 84.05 per cent. This was an outstanding effort by both air and ground crew demonstrating the RAAF's ability to mount and sustain its rotary wing capability in the most extreme of operational environments.

Key Points

- The RAAF developed its Iroquois capability in Vietnam into a highly proficient and effective battlefield helicopter force.

- Battlefield helicopters are not typical of armoured or ground based transports, the capability must be properly managed and tasked to ensure ongoing development and availability.
- RAAF Iroquois operations embraced a wide variety of roles during the

Vietnam conflict, and the utility and flexibility of the platform demonstrated the great potential helicopters would have in future conflicts.

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