



The RAAF Rotary Wing Experience:

Preparing for War

By Mr Martin James

In the years following World War II the RAAF became increasingly interested in the use of rotary wing aircraft. After assessing the use of autogyros through 1942-3, the RAAF and the Army identified a number of roles and tasks which justified the need to acquire a rotary wing capability for the Australian armed forces. However, before any helicopters could be purchased, the war ended and any sense of urgency in establishing an operational rotary wing capability was lost.

However, the culmination of World War II did not end Australia's interest in the potential of helicopters, and in 1947 the RAAF purchased the first of three Sikorsky S.51 Dragonfly helicopters. While this acquisition marked the beginning of military helicopter flying in Australia, the limited number of airframes procured did not immediately bestow an operational capability. Even the later acquisition of two Bristol Sycamore helicopters during the 1950s was insufficient to establish a truly robust operational helicopter capability.

The RAAF achieved a sustainable and capable helicopter force only with the purchase of 16 UH-1B Iroquois helicopters, which were delivered through 1962-4. The first helicopters were initially allotted to No 9 Squadron, then to No 5 Squadron when the unit formed in May 1964. The Iroquois or 'Huey' helicopters provided the RAAF a

modern and flexible platform with which to perform a variety of tasks. Initially the Iroquois were used for Search and Rescue (SAR), Army support and humanitarian aid.

No 5 Squadron's formation was prompted by the need to deploy a helicopter force to Malaysia as part of Australia's commitment to the South East Asian Treaty Organisation. To support this deployment it became necessary for No 9 Squadron to increase its training role while continuing to be responsible for the conduct of domestic SAR, Army support and aid flights. This increased training commitment was however justified in view of the national commitment.

Once in Malaysia, No 5 Squadron was soon employed in multinational exercises as well as in 'Border Operations'. These were flights conducted in direct support of operations against communist terrorists, known as CTs who were still active along the Malaysian/Thai border area.

It was in these Border Operations that the utility and versatility of the Iroquois became increasingly evident and the RAAF began what was to become the long journey of professional mastery of rotary wing operations. However, as it would find out in 1966, the experience in Malaysia would not be sufficient to create the depth of

professionalism necessary to carry out dedicated combat missions.

It became clear in 1965 that Australia was considering increasing its commitment to the war in Vietnam. Under these circumstances the possibility that Iroquois would be part of the expanded commitment became very real. At this point RAAF leadership demonstrated a lack of appreciation of the preparation and commitment needed to support such a deployment. There also existed a mistaken belief that the experience gained in Malaysia was sufficient to prepare crews for any likely employment in Vietnam. As events unfolded it became apparent that the RAAF had in fact learnt very little and needed to absorb a steep learning curve. That learning experience was to be shared with the Australian Army, who knew even less about the operational deployment and employment of helicopters, but clearly understood that helicopters would be critical to the conduct of their counterinsurgency operations.

In the lead up to the deployment to Vietnam, it became clear that the RAAF had very few experienced personnel, limited numbers of helicopters and lacked training and logistics support within Australia to sustain simultaneous overseas deployments to both Malaysia and Vietnam. It took a major reorganisation of assets as well as command and control arrangements, including the withdrawal of No 5 Squadron from Malaysia, to establish a sustainable base capable of supporting the envisaged tempo, scope and duration of the extended operational deployment to Vietnam.

Even with that reorganisation there remained deficiencies within No 9 Squadron when they deployed. There was a critical shortage of armour plating protection for both machines and personnel and the helicopters had no door-gun mounts. This lack of preparation

was typical across the whole Australian task force. For example, the ammunition shortage within the newly arrived Army task force was so critical that the RAAF airlifted nearly all their own stock of machine gun and small arms ammunition to ensure that their Army brethren were not left exposed.

From this difficult beginning the RAAF rapidly demonstrated a professionalism and increasingly adept ability to operate helicopters in the harsh and demanding conditions of South Vietnam. This growing capability and confidence showed its mettle during a critical phase of the Battle of Long Tan.

When D Company of 6th Battalion was surrounded and battling for their lives against overwhelming numbers they became critically short of ammunition and requested resupply by air. With a dangerously low cloud base and extremely heavy rain reducing visibility to almost zero, the RAAF component commander, GPCAPT Peter Raw, himself a highly experienced and decorated bomber pilot, expressed doubts that the helicopters would be able to conduct the mission. However, the senior and most experienced helicopter pilot on hand, FLTLT Bruce Lane was of the view that the mission was feasible and one that needed to be done. Lane was proved correct in his assessment and the beleaguered D Company was resupplied through airdrops even as their stock of ammunition was down to around a total of 100 rounds.

The disparity of experience across the RAAF rotary wing force was progressively addressed as senior commanders gained more experience with helicopters and the force as a whole matured. The 'raise, train and sustain' arrangements that had been instituted with the reorganisation of rotary wing assets on the eve of the Vietnam deployment was

increasingly bolstered with the return to Australia of every rotation of personnel from Vietnam. Consequently, the resulting operational training capability was better placed to prepare air and ground personnel for their forthcoming deployments.

In many ways the RAAF was learning while fighting. A situation not unfamiliar to the experience of the AFC in Middle East and Europe during World War I, No 77 Squadron during their transition from P-51 Mustangs to Meteor jet fighters in midst of the Korean War and the more recent experience of No 5 Flight establishing Heron UAV operations in Afghanistan. While it was not an ideal situation, the fact remains that No 9 Squadron rapidly demonstrated a superior ability to operate in theatre. This ability was recognised by our allies when the much better equipped and experienced US helicopters units sought advice from the RAAF on how to better sustain their own operations in the war.

- *The development of the RAAF's rotary wing capability required building up critical mass, organisation and forward planning.*
- *Preparations for operations must have an element of realistic training and conduct of exercises involving the forces that are to be deployed.*
- *There is significant onus of responsibility on senior leaders to plan the development of both technical and*

professional mastery of new capabilities if they are to be optimally employed.



The Bristol Sycamore helicopter in service with the RAAF's No 1 Air Trials unit. The Sycamores provided the RAAF a useful utility helicopter but were operated in too few numbers and in too few mission types to provide a basis for operational capability.



A No 5 Squadron Iroquois lands on the deck of HMAS Sydney in preparation for transportation to Malaysia May 1964.

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