

RAAF in the Vietnam War

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The Origins of the RAAF Commitment to the Vietnam War

By Mr Martin James

The origins of the RAAF's involvement in Vietnam 1963-75 can be traced back to the 1954 Geneva Conference, called to finalise the armistice agreement which ended the fighting in the Korean War. Also on the conference agenda were discussions around the emerging independent states of Indochina (Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam). While the Geneva Conference failed to reach a meaningful agreement on the situation in Korea, it did result in a decision on the withdrawal of French forces from Indochina and the partition of Vietnam along the 17th Parallel, separated into a communist North and a republican South. Elections were to be held no later than July 1956 to enable the Vietnamese to decide on the nature of their government on reunification.

In a move intended to curb communist influence and encourage stability within the Indochina region, Australia joined with several other powers, most notably Britain, France and the US, to form the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) in 1955. The aim of SEATO was to underwrite the sovereign independence of South-East Asian states. More specifically, the US increasingly directed

SEATO initiatives towards curbing the spread of communism in the region. As the security and political situation in South Vietnam deteriorated, due in no small measure to the Viet Cong communist insurgency backed by North Vietnam, Australia and the US became increasingly drawn into a war aimed at resisting further North Vietnamese incursions into the South. The escalation was gradual: as Viet Cong operations developed into almost routine attacks against government officials, the response from the US, and later Australia, was to increase direct military assistance to the Republic of Vietnam Army. In August 1962, 30 Australian Army advisors were deployed to South Vietnam as the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam.



*No. 9 Squadron RAAF Iroquois helicopter door gunner, seen from inside the helicopter, while en route from Vung Tau to the Australian Task Force Headquarters at Bia Ria.
Source: Australian War Memorial*

The first meaningful RAAF commitment in South Vietnam occurred in May 1963 when an

Air Attaché, Group Captain Brinsley was appointed to the Australian Embassy in Saigon. This was followed within days by the first operational missions in South Vietnam by a RAAF aircraft. Over the period 9-21 May 1963, Dakota A65-119 from No 2 Squadron's transport flight based at RAAF Base Butterworth and captained by Flying Officer David Cooper, conducted 28 sorties in South Vietnam. The missions were predominantly humanitarian aid flights, delivering some 25 000 kg of food and medical supplies to Montagnard refugees displaced by the Viet Cong insurgency. This short deployment marked the beginning of the RAAF presence in Vietnam, which was to continue in varying forms and with only minor breaks until 1975.

Prior to the relief flights of May 1963, Australia had been under increasing pressure from the South Vietnamese and US governments to commit transport aircraft to provide supply and administrative support to the counterinsurgency effort. These requests escalated to include more aircrew to provide additional airlift capacity to the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF).

Until 1963, these calls had been resisted for three interrelated reasons. First, the RAAF was undergoing a major re-equipment program which required the transition of a majority of its aircrew and technical personnel to new aircraft types. Furthermore, the management of the induction of the new platforms had to be balanced against the retirement of the outgoing aircraft. With the Dassault Mirage replacing the CAC Sabre, the de Havilland Caribou replacing the C-47 Dakota, along with the introduction to service of UH-1 Iroquois helicopters, Lockheed Neptunes and Orions, the manpower of the RAAF was becoming stretched.

The second reason for resisting a commitment to Vietnam was the RAAF's existing counterinsurgency and Far East Strategic Reserve commitments in Ubon, Thailand and at Butterworth, Malaysia. With base support units, a control and reporting unit and three fighter, one bomber and a helicopter squadron operating in the region, the limited resources of the RAAF were stretched even further.



Airfield Defence Guards of the Australian Quick Reaction Team respond to a night incident on the perimeter of Phan Rang airbase. Source: Australian War Memorial

The cost of both the equipment replacement program and the operational tempo of the early 1960s combined to generate the third challenge the RAAF faced in supporting additional commitments. In 1962, the RAAF was on the cusp of deciding on its next generation of strike aircraft, and although the preferred platform had yet to be identified, the cost of the possible options were to make it one of the most expensive acquisitions in RAAF history. The Chief of the Air Staff (CAS) at the time, Air Marshal Valston Hancock, was understandably concerned that the RAAF budget was already fully committed and any additional costs incurred due to further operational deployments would potentially curtail the Air Force's development plans.

The turning point in the RAAF's ability to support a deployment to Vietnam came in 1964 as No 38 Squadron began its transition to the de Havilland Caribou aircraft. With potential to deploy six Caribous on the horizon, the capacity of the RAAF to supply meaningful tactical transport capability in Vietnam was realised. The timing of these developments proved critical.

During 1964, the Government of South Vietnam was destabilised by two military coups. These events led to a surge in the Viet Cong insurgency seeking to take advantage of the now dysfunctional leadership in South Vietnam. In response to requests for increased military aid to the war from both South Vietnam and the US, the Australian Government decided it was in the best interests of the nation and those of its allies to agree to an increase in the Australian commitment. As part of this increase, the commitment of a RAAF Caribou deployment was announced on 8 June 1964.



No. 5 Airfield Construction Squadron prepare a hangar floor in Vietnam for the laying of cement. Source: Australian War Memorial

While the decision to deploy the Caribous was established on paper, there was a significant amount of work required before the aircraft were available for deployment. So new was the Caribou in RAAF service that there were only sufficient aircraft in Australia to sustain a

training capability, necessitating the formation of the RAAF Transport Flight Vietnam (RTFV) at RAAF Base Butterworth, from aircraft delivered directly from the de Havilland factory in Canada.

The formation of the RTFV and its arrival in Vietnam in August 1964 marked the beginning of a significant RAAF presence in Vietnam which lasted until 1971. The RAAF commitment to the war resulted in the appointment of a one-star Commander RAAF Forces Vietnam in June 1966 and the expansion of the RTFV into No 35 Squadron. It would be joined in theatre by Nos 2 and 9 Squadrons, flying Canberra bombers and Iroquois helicopters, respectively, No 1 Operational Support Unit and No 5 Airfield Construction Squadron. Reflecting the fact that the Australian forces in Vietnam were there as contributions to a coalition, not all of the RAAF units served together under common operational lines of command. While Nos 2 and 35 Squadron were allocated for duty with the USAF Seventh Air Force, No 9 Squadron was under the direct control of No 1 Australian Task Force.

The commitment of RAAF forces to Vietnam mirrored the incremental commitment of Australian forces to the Vietnam War as a whole. These were not made as a simple response to the demands of the conflict, but rather to Australian Government policy developed in the pursuit of national security aims. The involvement of Australia in the conflict was one of choice rather than one of necessity as had been the case in World Wars I and II. The Vietnam War, like the Korean War before it, marked the transition of Australia's defence posture from one of simply being a partner in the Imperial Defence arrangements, to one of an independent actor.

Key Points

- The RAAF commitment to the war in Vietnam was in response to national security requirements in a period when Australia was increasingly acting independently of previous Commonwealth policies.

- The development of RAAF capability and its ability to support multiple operational deployments in the 1960s was limited by force size and budget.
- Force development must take into account the possibility of concurrent operational commitments.

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