

# RAAF in the Vietnam War

History and Heritage – Air Force (HH–AF)  
September 2022

## RAAF Neptunes and the Vietnam War

*By SQNLDR David Burns*

On 29 April 1965, the Australian Government announced its decision to commit an infantry battalion for ground combat service in the Vietnam War. In addition to the First Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR), the force would include a troop of armoured carriers and a logistics supply company. One company of the battalion, along with elements of its Support and Administration companies and most of the force's vehicles, equipment and supplies, were to be moved to Vietnam a month later on board HMAS Sydney (III)—the former aircraft carrier that had been converted to service in the Royal Australian Navy as a fast troop transport. The remainder of 1RAR would follow early in June, on board a Qantas Boeing 707 jet operating from RAAF Base Richmond.

At this stage of the war, HMAS Sydney was a high-value asset of the Australian Defence Force in that she had a unique sea-lift capability, and a successful attack on her would seriously delay or possibly cancel Australia's commitment to the war. Sydney and its cargo had to be protected at all costs. Based on this assessment, the decision was taken in the Defence Department to provide multi-layered protection for the deployment,

with both sea and land-based air power playing a major role in the operation.



*Neptune aircraft*

At that time, the RAAF's maritime patrol force consisted of two squadrons of Neptunes: No 10 Squadron based at Townsville, and No 11 Squadron based at Richmond. On 21 April, WGCDR Geoff Michael AFC, the CO of 10 SQN, was briefed about Operation Trimdon – the deployment of 1RAR to Vietnam – and ordered to begin planning the air support required. There was no specific threat identified, however the worst case scenario would be an attack on HMAS Sydney by a submarine of a nation that was allied or sympathetic to North Vietnam. The tone of the briefing was reflected in the RAAF Operations Order which stated 'a wartime situation is to be assumed throughout the operation'. Continuous air support was required all the way to the destination, the Vietnamese port of Vung Tau. All Neptune aircraft involved in Operation Trimdon would

carry live torpedoes and depth charges on all sorties. Aircraft captains were briefed that attacks were authorised on any target that 'was acting in a hostile manner' – although what constituted a 'hostile manner' was not defined.

RAAF support to Operation Trimdon commenced on 28 May, when three Neptunes of 11 SQN deployed to RAAF Townsville and two to Lae, in Papua New Guinea. That same day, support personnel and equipment were deployed to Lae by C-130A aircraft. One 10 SQN Neptune joined the others at Lae on 29 May. These aircraft shadowed the HMAS Sydney task group during passage through the Coral Sea, around the island of New Guinea and through the Vitiaz Straits between New Guinea and New Britain. At least one Neptune remained on station at all times approximately 200 km ahead of the task group. Passive sonobuoys dropped in the water listened for any submerged submarines while the Neptune crews used radar and visual lookouts to detect any submarine on the surface or at snorting depth. The escorting destroyer HMAS Duchess provided close-in protection using sonar and radar. The detection of a possible hostile submarine required the RAAF crew to warn HMAS Sydney's captain who would then coordinate an appropriate response using all the assets available. Unless contact with a possible threat was made, all aircraft had to maintain radio silence.

By 2 June, approximately half-way between New Guinea and the Philippines, HMAS Sydney was joined by the destroyer escort HMAS Parramatta. Three Neptune aircraft began flying support sorties from Agana airfield on the island of Guam. Two of these aircraft flew to Naval Air Station (NAS) Sangley Point in the Philippines on 4 June to join five other RAAF Neptunes which had just

completed an exercise in the Philippines area. Together, these aircraft and crews provided protection to HMAS Sydney for the remainder of its voyage to Vietnam.

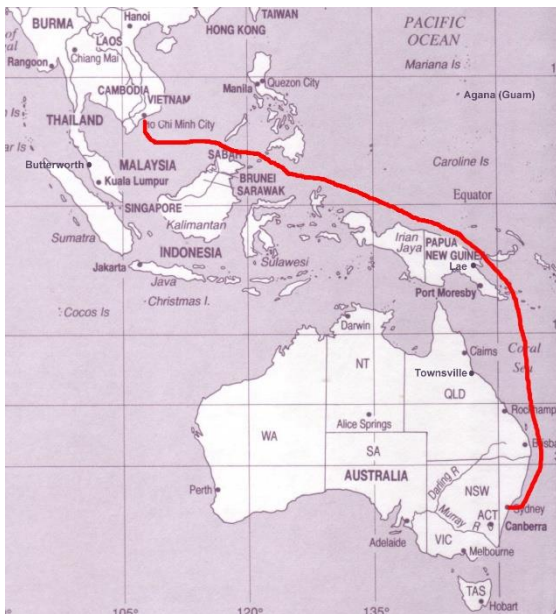
On 4 June, the HMAS Sydney task group rendezvoused with the aircraft carrier HMAS Melbourne and its two support ships for the next part of the voyage. During this most dangerous stage, HMAS Melbourne's Wessex helicopters were deployed in a screening role using dipping sonar while its Gannet fixed-wing aircraft flew mid-field anti-submarine patrols during daylight and Sea Venom fighters flew sorties at dawn and dusk. Neptunes kept up the deep field patrols night and day.



*HMAS Melbourne II with Gannet aircraft*

As HMAS Sydney approached the coast of Vietnam on the night of 7–8 June, a Neptune kept watch for any hostile small craft that tried to approach the ship. With HMAS Sydney safely arrived and unloading at anchor in the port of Vung Tau, the last Neptune headed for RAAF Butterworth, which was the closest military airfield outside of Vietnam. Their mission over, the Neptunes returned to their home bases by 12 June, and support crews were flown home from Sangley Point and Agana by two RAAF C130A aircraft soon after.

The result of Operation Trimdon was that 1RAR arrived in Vietnam on time. No attacks on Sydney were attempted and no hostile vessels were observed. Were the resources used in protecting Sydney and her cargo justified? Certainly the countries that were supporting the communist side in Vietnam had conventional submarines that were capable of interfering with the Australian deployment. Perhaps the presence of an aggressive, in-depth defence deterred any potential aggressor. Of more lasting importance, however, was the recognition that any expeditionary force deployed from Australia required the provision of a comprehensive layered defence to provide warning and weapon coverage against air, surface or underwater threats.



Map showing the journey of HMAS Sydney

Later voyages of HMAS Sydney to Vietnam were also provided with screening aircraft. Two voyages in 1966 were escorted by RAAF Neptunes as well as aircraft from HMAS Melbourne. For the voyages undertaken in 1967 and 1968, HMAS Sydney embarked its own flight of four Wessex helicopters from either No 725 Squadron or No 817 Squadron to provide screening.

HMAS Sydney and the Neptunes have gone but the requirement to maintain sea control remains. Ships such as the Landing Helicopter Dock (LHD) give the ADF the capability to deploy an expeditionary ground force over long distances and then sustain it during operations. However, such an expeditionary force will need protection from air, surface and sub-surface attack. Networked air power provided by sophisticated attack aircraft, air defence ships, maritime reconnaissance aircraft, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and ship-borne helicopters will be a major component of this protection in the future.

### Key Points

- Providing multidimensional and layered defence for an expeditionary force is a complex joint operation.
- Expeditionary operations need long range force protection.

*This article was originally published in Pathfinder 83, February 2008*