

Possums & Bird Dogs: Australian Army Aviation's 161 Reconnaissance Flight in South Vietnam

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Reviewed by Mike O'Brien

The most recent bibliography I have seen on Australians in the War in Vietnam is in Jeffrey Grey and Jeff Doyle's *Australia R&R: Representations and Reinterpretations of Australia's War in Vietnam* (Chevvy Chase: Vietnam Generation Inc, 1991). When you look at this comprehensive listing of the books and articles resulting from Australia's longest war (and mentally bring the list up-to-date with those more recently published) some trends emerge. In terms of official history we have been well served and await (perhaps eagerly) the final volume on the Army commitment. These histories are worthy successors to those edited by C.E.W. Bean, Gavin Long and Robert. O'Neill; we have much to thank Dr Peter Edwards for. But there are evident gaps in the extent of published unit histories which can never be expected to be filled by the Official Histories.

Unit histories fall into several categories. Souvenir pictorial battalion histories were issued soon after unit tours of duty, in relatively small numbers. You would be lucky to see them in any school library, even though most have been reprinted. They are short on analysis and strongly echo the approach of the *Anzac Book*. While they may contribute to history they are more for individual remembrance. Luckily we have had a crop of more analytical unit histories such as this volume to help round-out this collection. The ones published so far are strongly biased towards infantry, armour and engineers with surprisingly few gunner contributions. Logistic unit histories – well, there's a thought! Army Aviation was essentially an arm (rather than service) in this war and that makes this book most welcome and almost overdue.

What are the characteristics of a good unit history? It should tell the story of the unit, preferably so that it can be understood by readers who have not shared the same background and experiences. It should go beyond bald facts so that it communicates the feeling of the unit and what made it tick. It should, and this may be a personal view, allow the soldiers in the unit to tell a large part of the story in their own words. Readability, honesty, accuracy and the right atmosphere should be its hallmarks.

This history of the fixed and rotary-wing reconnaissance aircraft integral to the Australian Army in Vietnam tackles an important subject and it does it well. Its author has the great advantage of having served with the unit as an attached RAAF airman in 1967-68. He has interviewed comprehensively and used their contributions wisely to tell a large segment of the overall story. In a unit where officers did the primary combat job, he has ensured, quite rightly, that it is not just an

“officers’ history” and it is the richer for that approach. He has been particularly successful in producing a narrative with just enough external context so that a reader can follow not only the progress of the war, but also the relationship of the Reconnaissance Flight to those units that it supported and their operational progress. That was not a trivial task. And Winifred Mumford, who did the maps for the book, has done a marvelous job.

I consider from my limited personal experience that Army Aviation pilots in Vietnam were remarkably capable and mature individuals, perhaps far more mature than many of their contemporaries on the ground. If I am correct, this is a fine testament to their selection, training (both flying training with its RAAF and Army components and, in most cases, the Officer Training Unit at Scheyville) and their unit leadership. I have no doubt at all that they contributed disproportionately to the Task Force's capability. Perhaps I feel that this book might err towards excessive humility on this topic. As an outsider, I would like to give them far more credit.

A few annoying inaccuracies have crept in. Ian Bowring, Allen and Unwin's military editor, should not have allowed “Corps” to be mis-spelt in the preliminaries. Brigadier O.D. Jackson's name was Oliver not Owen. 1ATF deployed to the north-east of Saigon prior to Tet 1968, not north-west. In terms of balance, it is perhaps natural that the author is better informed on the period 1967-68 than those that follow. I also regret that the author has not dealt more with the RAAF attitude that severely limited the arming of Army Aviation aircraft during this period; this is a topic that deserves deeper analysis. On a similar topic, the relationship between this unit and the often complementary roles of 9 Squadron RAAF is less than fully dealt with.

The writer of the blurb for this book on its back cover has wrongly judged its target audience as ‘for all aviation enthusiasts’. While I am sure that this volume will have particular appeal to them and to all Army aviators in particular, all those interested in the important topic of the employment of the Army aviation arm would benefit from it. But as well as being an important text for studying the employment of an all-arms independent brigade, this book is an entertaining and engrossing read. We must be grateful that the author has completed this book while most of his oral sources are still alive. ♦

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