

International Journal of Naval History

December 2009

Volume 8 Number 3

John Perryman and Brett Mitchell. *Australia's Navy in Vietnam: Royal Australian Navy Operations 1965-72*. Topmill Pty Ltd., 2007. 95 pp. Illustrations, glossary, appendices.

Review by John Darrell Sherwood,
Naval History and Heritage Command

Between 1965 and 1972, 13,500 Royal Australian Navy (RAN) sailors fought in the Vietnam War. The vast majority served on destroyers and logistics ships, but the RAN also contributed helicopter crewmen, combat divers, headquarters staff, medical officers, chaplains, and other support forces for the conflict.

Australia's Navy in Vietnam chronicles the exploits and accomplishments of the RAN in the war, beginning with the service's first diplomatic ship visit to the country in 1957, and ending with a chapter on HMAS *Sydney*, an aircraft carrier converted into a fast troop transport that made 24 voyages to Vietnam from 1965 to 1972, transporting over 16,000 Australian soldiers and marines to the war zone.

The book is not meant as a replacement for the definitive *Up Top: The Royal Australian Navy and Southeast Asian Conflicts, 1955-1972* (Allen & Unwin, 1998) by Jeffrey Grey, which the authors give credit in the acknowledgements; rather, it's designed to be a highly illustrated overview similar in many respects to Edward J. Marolda's *The U.S. Navy in the Vietnam War: An Illustrated History* (Brassey's, 2002).

Organized chronologically and by community, beginning with destroyer service, the book provides brief histories of every major ship and unit sent to Vietnam. The authors relied heavily on war diaries and ships historical files to put these narratives together. On occasion, they add color to the narrative with anecdotal material gleaned from veteran interviews. They discuss, for example, how Naval Airman Ian Hughes designed the patch for the U.S. Army's 135th Assault Helicopter Company—the company the Royal Australian Navy Helicopter Flight Vietnam was assigned to, beginning in 1967. The patch featured Army Pilot wings on top of an anchor and surrounded with gold laurels. Underneath this logo, Hughes added the slogan, "Get the Bloody Job Done." That attitude seems to have infected every Australian sent to Vietnam despite the war's unpopularity in Australia. Whether in surface warfare ships or helicopters or on the ground, Australians never hesitated to volunteer for dangerous missions, and endure the same hot, miserable living conditions as their American comrades.

Over 200 Australian Navy helicopter pilots transported supplies and flew tactical air support missions throughout the Mekong River Delta area and elsewhere in Vietnam between 1967 and 1971, suffering five killed in action and another twenty-two wounded. Australian divers had one of the most difficult jobs—defending ports and waterways from mines and sappers. Divers also were involved in salvaging ships and aircraft and clearing canals and small waterways of obstructions. Many of these ancillary duties involved traveling up dangerous rivers and taking frequent fire in U.S. Navy Swift Boats (PCFs) and shallow-draft skimmers.

Australian destroyers contributed mightily to the “Sea Dragon” naval gunfire campaign against North Vietnam. They also provided gunfire support for allied troops in South Vietnam, and participated in the coastal blockade of South Vietnam, code-named “Market Time.” Of note, several Australian officers commanded task units consisting of both American and Australian surface ships. Australian vessels also took some hits during the course of the war. Sadly, the most damaging attack resulted from friendly fire. In the early hours of 17 June 1968, a U.S. Air Force jet fired a missile at HMAS *Hobart* (D 39), killing two sailors and wounding another seven. Not knowing the aircraft was friendly, *Hobart* fired five rounds in return, causing the aircraft to turn away.

The strength of this volume is its vast collection of photo illustrations, many of which have never before been published. I was particularly impressed by the number of full-color photographs that the authors have unearthed and included in the book, especially those of individual servicemen. The book also stands out as a fine short history of the RAN in Vietnam.



The Editors
International Journal of Naval History
editors@ijnhonline.org

© Copyright 2010, International Journal of Naval History, All Rights Reserved