

# Reunion Australia!

"Lest We Forget"...

**Tân Sơn Nhứt AB, 377th SPS,  
Detachment 1/377th SP  
Royal Australian Air Force's  
Air Base Defense Group,  
Vũng Tàu Air Field**

by **David Dowdell**  
1967-1968

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*RAAF No.9SQ Veterans marching down the streets of Tamworth New South Wales*

The year was 1968. I was a member of the 377th SPS, stationed at Tân Sơn Nhứt Air Base, Republic of Vietnam. Our squadron was still pulling extended duty and reserve QRT's were still being deployed along the base perimeter. The sounds of incoming mortar and rocket fire seemed to be a nightly occurrence.

I had just returned to full duty on Charlie Flight/Charlie Sector, after being assigned to CSC and riding on an Army EOD Team, in a light duty capacity. I had received minor shrapnel wounds from a 122mm rocket attack back on 18 February 68, when I was posted on the north revetment aircraft parking area.

MSgt Garcia, the NCOIC in Charlie Sector, advised me that I had been selected for transfer to Detachment 1/377th SPS, at Vũng Tàu Air Field. The TDY orders were for a ninety-day assignment at the so-called in country R&R center, so I had no problem with the transfer.

*A current RAAF Airman chats with No. 9SQ Vietnam veterans*



*before their formation in downtown Tamworth, New South Wales .*

Detachment 1 was assigned to the Royal Australian Air Force's Air Base Defense Group. This combined unit's mission was to provide typical Air Base defense protection. The ADG's and SP's pulled entry control and fixed bunker/tower posts, as well as mobile strike team response.

Vũng Tàu Air Field supported a wide variety of military units from various branches of service and country's of origin. The RAAF's 9 Squadron Attack Helicopter Unit and the U.S. Navy's Seawolves Attack Helicopter Squadron proved to be a significant presence at the airfield. The RAAF also had a number of C-7 fixed wing aircraft at the airfield.

The limitations of the airfield precluded many large aircraft from landing at or taking off from the airfield. I seem to recall that only C-123 and C-130 transports were the only transient aircraft that used Vũng Tàu Air Field on a regular basis.

It didn't take me long to experience what it would be like to be posted with the RAAF ADG-ER's. They were a unique group of individuals...to say the least...and humping the flight line, or pulling bunker and mobile Golf units with them was an experience I will never forget!

I want to break away from my experiences with the Royal Australian Air Force, at Vũng Tàu Air Field, to give you some perspective on their role in the Vietnam War.

*9SQ veterans seem to come from all walks of life. This is one of the Vietnam veterans who represented the Australian Vietnam motorcycle club.*



In June 1966, the RAAF's 9 Squadron's eight UH-1B helicopters and a small maintenance party sailed for Vietnam in the HMAS Sydney. They anchored off Vũng Tàu on June 12, 1966, and the Huey Iroquois were flown off the ship to Vũng Tàu Air Field, the Squadron's new home. The remainder of the Squadron flew to Vietnam in a Qantas aircraft.

*RAAF No. 9SQ members forming up for the march to the Tamworth Vietnam Memorial.*



Operations began the very next day when the Squadron received an urgent request for the 5th Royal Australian Regiment (5RAR) for a resupply of ammunition. While it was not expected that operations would begin so quickly, the ammo resupply mission was accepted. This first mission was to mark the beginning of six years of combat flying for the 9th Squadron.

Australian and New Zealand forces served honorably during the Vietnam War. Their actual involvement in Vietnam began in 1962, when a thirty man Australian Army Training Team - composed of jungle warfare specialists - arrived in-country to train South Vietnamese Army Forces.

In April 1965 Australia deployed its first combat troops, the First Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment, which was attached to the U.S. 173rd Airborne Brigade at Biên Hòa Air Base. By September 1965, Australia had supplemented the initial battalion of 778 personnel with units of artillery, air reconnaissance, and engineers, totaling 1,447 personnel.

*Vietnam War Memorial - Tamworth, New South Wales*



*AUS RAAF No. 9SQ Wreath Laying Ceremony*

Throughout its participation, Australia relied heavily on U.S. logistical support and as a result only a small percentage of its troops engaged in support services. In contrast to the U.S., Australia rotated entire regiments, rather than individuals, into and out of Viet Nam, but like the U.S., it conscripted soldiers to fill its ranks.

Australia combined its military forces with those of New Zealand. With its military contribution expanding rapidly, they established a concerted presence in Phouc Tuy Hòa and Bein Hoa Provinces, operating base camps in such places as Nui Dat, northeast of the Vung Tau Peninsula, and Fire Support Bases Coral and Balmoral, northeast of Saigon.

The Battle of Coral was the biggest unit level battle involving Australian and New Zealand forces in the Vietnam War. For twenty-six days in May/June 1968, units of the First Australian Task Force fought a series of actions around Coral and Balmoral, Against combined units of NVA and VC forces, where ground forces fought close-combat actions against a determined enemy force. Their tactical use of artillery support and helicopter gun ship missions turned the battle against the enemy and broke enemy controls of this key staging area for attacks directed on the Saigon area. At the end of the operation, the First Australian Task Force dominated their area.

*The RAAF flag ceremony that concluded the wreath laying ceremony at the Tamworth Vietnam Veterans Memorial.*

Australian and New Zealand forces left Vietnam in 1971. Only a small contingent of Australian Army Assistance Group (AAAG) personnel remained in Southeast Asia to continue to train South Vietnamese and Khmer Republic Forces. They remained until January 1973.

Australian and New Zealand forces (ANZAC) reached its peak number of troops at 7,672 personnel, in 1969. A total of 386 ANZAC personnel were killed-in-action and 2,193 wounded.

The RAAF troops with whom the 377th Security Police personnel were assigned base defense duties with were a very unique group of individuals. The 'Aussies' and the 'Yanks'...as we called each other...formed immediate friendships and introduced each other to their ways of doing things.

The Aussie's were experts in the consumption of alcoholic beverage. I never drank more beer in my life than during my three month TDY at Vung Tau Air Field. Their beer of choice was Victoria Bitter, or more commonly known as VB, and they seemed to keep a "tinny" in my hand at all times when we were off duty. A tinny was a twelve-ounce aluminum can of beer.

Let it be known that the Aussie ADG troops were damn good soldiers, but they seemed to have a fondness for the practical joke, of which, the Yanks were the targets for these shenanigans. The Aussie's would report for duty with SLR 7.62 assault rifles. The flash suppressors on the SLR's were similar to the one's on the U.S. M-14 rifles, and they would cover their flash suppressors with long, aluminum cigar canisters. Each canister could hold a large cigar and the Aussie's would use these to minimize the amounts of dust and rain that could seep into the rifle barrel. One of their pranks was to remove the projectile off of a 7.62



round and use the primer and residual gunpowder to shoot the aluminum canister at unsuspecting 377th SPS personnel.

You had to keep your eyes on the perimeter fence line AND on the Aussie ADG troops around you because the threat of "assault" was equal on all sides. I reluctantly returned to Tân Sơn Nhứt Air Base in July 1968. The friendships and camaraderie we had with the Australians made it hard to leave Vũng Tàu.

In 1998, I began an effort to locate my old Aussie buddies from Vung Tau. It was a formidable task to say the least! Trying to locate them after thirty years, with the Pacific Ocean between us, made contact unlikely. Well, through the miracle of the internet, I found a few Australian web sites that were dedicated to their Vietnam Veterans organizations. I began to sign their guestbooks and left information on my unit's assignment at Vũng Tàu with my dates of service at the airfield.

*The eulogy and benediction at the Tamworth Memorial.*



I received e-mails from a few Aussie vets who were stationed in Vietnam after I rotated back, as well as messages from spouses of ANZAC Vietnam veterans. They provided me with leads on contacting some of these guys. Success was achieved when I received an e-mail from Neil Tyne. Neil was also known as 'Tiny', when he was a member of the ADG Squadron, at Vung Tau Air Field. Neil was living in Tasmania. He was retired from a career as a Supervising Governor at a prison facility and recalled many of the 377th SPS who were stationed at Vũng Tàu, in 1968. He provided me with the internet address of Alan Brazil, who was another ADG Squadron member I'd been attempting to locate. Alan was living on the mainland in the Newcastle, NSW area, and had also retired as a civil servant from the Australian prison system.

My e-mail files were quickly filling with contacts from many RAAF 9 SQ members who I didn't serve time with at Vung Tau Air Field. I began making new friends who shared one common link with me as a Vietnam veteran. These contacts continued for many months.

In October 2000, I received an invitation to attend their RAAF 9 SQ Vietnam Veteran's Reunion, to be held in Tamworth, NSW, on February 23rd thru 25th, 2001. My wife and I took this opportunity to travel 'down-under' and renew old friendships with my 'Australian mates'.

The 9 SQ Reunion was two years in the making. Squadron members from all points had committed to attend the reunion. Tamworth, New South Wales is the so-called 'Country Music Capital' of Australia. It is located about six hours-by-car from the coastal city of Brisbane. The challenge for us was the long and arduous flight from Central Ohio to the East Coast of Australia. It took us twenty-nine hours to travel from home to the Brisbane International Airport. Of that twenty-nine hours we were in the air for over twenty-two hours. We flew from Columbus to Houston, Houston to Honolulu, Honolulu to Guam, and Guam to Cairns, Queensland, in the Gold Coast Area of Australia.

*Sergeant Peter Amos, a former RAAF No.9SQ Vietnam veteran, stand in a moment of silence for fallen comrades*

*... Lest We Forget their only utterance .*

**We took a domestic Qantas flight, from Cairns to Brisbane, and were picked up by Don Paul, an RAAF 9SQ Vietnam veteran, for the six-hour drive to Tamworth, NSW. Donnie was a side door gunner on a UH-1B Iroquois gunship helicopter and was stationed at Vung Tau Air**



Field, in 1970-1971. We had never met before, but became friends during our drive to Tamworth. I had been warned in an e-mail, before our flight to Australia, "the drinking would commence...once we arrived in Tamworth", and they were correct.

The first evening's activities were held at the Returning Servicemen's Club (RSL Club), in Tamworth. Their RSL Clubs are similar to our VFW Clubs in America. I met my sponsor, Peter Amos, at the RSL Club. Peter also helped us arrange our trip to Australia. He was a crew chief on a UH-1B Iroquois out of Vung Tau during the time I was stationed there.

I was quickly reintroduced to Victoria Bitter beer. I immediately realized that the Aussie's still drank like they did over thirty-three years ago....the only problem was that I didn't! The following morning, the entire reunion party met for a business meeting and social hour. 9SQ Officers conducted an audio visual history of their unit and had a variety of displays in the meeting room.

In the evening, all 9SQ veterans mustered into formation wearing their awards and citations. The RAAF Marching Band and an array of vintage military vehicles added to the formation, which marched through the downtown streets of Tamworth. A wreath laying ceremony was conducted at the Tamworth City Memorial with much emotion and formality. Vehicles and pedestrians stopped to watch the ceremony and also honored those who didn't return. "Lest We Forget" was recited during the roll call of those RAAF 9SQ members who gave the ultimate sacrifice.

The formation proceeded to the RSL Club for an evening a drinking, dining, and dancing. Friendships were renewed, photos were shared with one another; stories, both traumatic and comical were recanted amongst 9SQ veterans. A good time was had by all!

One story of heroism evolved around the actions of Flight Lieutenant Garry Cooper, who flew an OV-1 spotter airplane in III Corps. His efforts to save a downed pilot resulted in being the only Australian ever considered for the Congressional Medal of Honor.

One from the lighter side of the war, involved a 9SQ Huey pilot who was flying a gunship mission north of Vung Tau Air Field. The pilot saw a U.S. Army low-boy, flat bed truck, running light back towards Vung Tau. This type of truck hauls armored vehicles and has an extended flat bed capacity for either an M113 APC or an M-48 medium sized battle tank. The pilot maneuvered his Huey gunship down towards the vehicle. The unsuspecting U.S. Army truck driver was unaware of the chopper's presence above his rig.

Laughter erupted when 9SQ veterans recanted when the Huey pilot actually landed his gunship on the flat bed trailer...as the truck was rambling down Highway 2...and seeing the startled look on the driver's face as he glanced in his rear view mirror. "The Yanks eyes were as big as silver dollars when he saw the Huey, sitting on the flat bed under full power, in his rear view mirror", said the crew chief from that flight crew.

*Dave and Bev Dowdell attending the RAAF No.9SQ Vietnam Veteran's Reunion, in Tamworth, New South Wales AUS.*

I came away from the 9SQ Reunion with a commitment from the Aussie veterans to make a concerted effort to link up old USAF personnel with ANZAC personnel, in an attempt to renew old friendships. I know there are a lot of Vietnam Security Police Association members who had similar contacts with Australian military personnel while they were stationed in South Vietnam and Thailand. Whether it was at Korat AFB, Phang Rang AFB, or Vung Tau Air Field, the VSPA and 9SQ/ADG Associations need to compile their membership lists and internet addresses so more of us can experience the joy of renewing old, old friendships.

**David Dowdell**  
377th SPS,  
1967-1968



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