

Dreadful lady over the Mekong Delta: an analysis of RAAF Canberra operations in the Vietnam War

by Bob Howe

Royal Australian Air Force, Air Power Development Centre: Canberra; 2016; 267 pp.; ISBN 13: 9781925062199; RRP: \$18.00 (hardcover)



This book is much more than the title suggests. While it certainly covers the operations of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Canberra bombers in the Vietnam conflict, it also reminds the reader that military conflicts are not won by a single operation or battle, which in many cases is what we remember and rightfully commemorate. Rather, particular operations are the tactical results of the

strategic aspirations of international and national societies and regimes; their commitments of varying sizes to support these aspirations; the organisation and provision of equipment for the forces to be deployed; the development of command and control of these forces; the planning and logistic support of operations; and finally, the actual conduct of the various forms of the operations.

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Given his training and experience in the RAAF, the author, Wing Commander Bob Howe (Ret'd), a member of the United Services Institute of the ACT, is particularly well qualified to undertake the analysis presented in this book in which he addresses all of these elements which impacted on the air operations of the Canberra aircraft in Vietnam.

Chapter 1, the introduction, provides a brief history of Vietnam including the division of the country in 1954 by the Demilitarised Zone, which separated the north, with a communist government supported by the Soviet Union and China; from the south, with a non-communist government supported by the United States (US). The US sought to contain the communist forces to North Vietnam, a policy which severely constrained the military operations of the US forces. The chapter also gives an overview of the geography and importance of the Mekong Delta.

In Chapter 2, the forces of the south involved in the riverine operations in the Mekong Delta are outlined. These included the US Navy, the US Army, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, the Vietnam Navy, the US Air Force (USAF), the US Marine Corps, the US Coast Guard, the Vietnam Air Force, the Royal Australian Navy, the Australian Army and the RAAF. The array of different forces involved highlights the enormous problems of their cohesive command and control.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the US-led riverine operations in the Mekong Delta. In particular, it highlights that the allied war in South Vietnam was run by the Commander US Military Assistance Command Vietnam (COMUSMACV) conjointly with the Commander Vietnam Armed Force. It also recognises that the war was effectively an Army campaign with tactical air operations, including in the Mekong Delta, being wholly in support of the Army as directed by the US Seventh Air Force Headquarters, which was under the operational control of COMUSMACV. In the Mekong Delta, the need was recognised for a joint mobile force capable of operating in the area which led to the establishment of the Mobile Riverine Force in June 1967. The chapter describes a range of exercises conducted by Vice Admiral Zumwalt in

1968 and 1969 which reduced the influence of the insurgents in the Mekong Delta and allowed the allies to command its waterways. The withdrawal of US forces in 1971 saw the responsibility for the region pass to South Vietnamese forces.

Chapter 4 gets to the heart of the air operations in support of the war in the Mekong Delta. These were the responsibility of the Seventh Air Force although most of the operations on the ground were primarily Vietnamese. Air operations were controlled by a Direct Air Support Centre which planned the strike missions. The chapter describes the role of the forward air controllers and the efforts to achieve target legitimacy.

The Canberra bombers of No. 2 Squadron RAAF functioned under a memorandum of understanding between the RAAF and the USAF; and operated from Phan Rang air base in central South Vietnam as part of the USAF 35th Tactical Fighter Wing. Chapter 5 details the suitability of the Canberra Mark 20 jet bomber for the riverine operations. These advantages included range, endurance, ability to fly below low cloud bases, bombing platform stability, and bombing accuracy.

Chapter 6 summarises the effectiveness of the operations of the 2 Squadron Canberras in support of riverine operations during the four years from June 1967 to June 1971, some 40 per cent of their operations. The professionalism and dedication of all personnel of the squadron were vital in extracting the maximum capability from the systems of the Canberra aircraft.

In Chapter 7, the author reviews the Canberra operations and brings out the political constraints which limited their effectiveness. Nevertheless, he concludes that the squadron performed to the best of its ability.

Each chapter is supported by comprehensive notes and with the photographs, maps, tables *etc.* which are easily understood.

This book is highly recommended to anyone with an interest in understanding the Vietnam conflict, the political and other constraints under which the various participants operated, the application of air power and finally the operational conduct and effectiveness of the RAAF Canberra bombers in support of riverine operations in the Mekong Delta. It is an excellent analysis.

Doug Roser