

“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, RVN

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 187 “...keeping the memories alive”

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MAGPIE 31 PART 2

BLONDES, BOMBS AND BUNKERS

“MAGPIE 31”

Blondes, Bombs and Bunkers – Part 2

Speakers

Roger Lambert

Bob Howe

John Whitehead

Roger Lambert
Platoon Commander
9 Platoon, C Company,
2nd Tour



Roger Lambert

Readers would recall that I had added a 'Stop Press' to my original article, 'Blondes, Bombs and Bunkers' stating that I may have identified the aircrew of **Magpie 31**. How wrong can one be?

In March 2013, the Webmaster, where I had my story posted, emailed me to advise that a Bob

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Howe had contacted him. Bob wrote "I've just come across Roger Lambert's article "Blondes, Bombs and Bunkers" on your excellent web site regarding No 2 Squadron (2 Sqn) bombing in Vietnam and it is the first time I've seen or heard of a description of what it was like to be on or near the receiving end of our bombs. On the day in question, 21 September 1969, I was the navigator/bomb aimer in Magpie 41, which was the flight after Magpie 31. Has Roger sorted out who was in **Magpie 31** because if he hasn't then I can help?"

I was cautiously excited. As I wrote at the time, "It's the stroke of luck I was looking for, Ted! They say all things come to those that wait but I'd just about given up hope. I'll let you know how I get on with Bob. Let's hope it's 'my' Magpie 31."

"It would be great to be able to put a 'face' to the crew and to thank them for their support all those years ago."

I wasted no time in contacting Bob to thank him for contacting me through my website. "I would greatly appreciate it if you are able to help me out with identifying Magpie 31's crew that day. It would be great to be able to put a 'face' to the crew and to thank them for their support all those years ago. Having tracked down Jim Farris, the pilot of the Forward Air Controller (FAC) Jade 03, and exchanged memories, being able to be put in contact with the crew of **Magpie 31** would be the icing on the cake. It would make a fitting addendum to the article and close the loop on a personal, human interest 'crusade' I've been on for many years.

I was a little surprised to hear that my article was the first time that you'd heard about what it was like to be on the receiving end of 6 x 750 lb bombs in Close Air Support (CAS). We were used to being supported by 105 Battery's 105mm howitzers whenever they were fired for effect when we were in contact with the enemy but nothing could quite prepare one for the effect of **Magpie 31's** aerial support. It gave a whole new meaning to the expression 'Did the earth move for you?' As I said in the article, I don't think that my diggers have ever forgiven me for that aerial bombardment. It's a subject that comes up at every platoon reunion and while we can have a chuckle about it now, it really was in deadly earnest some 44 years ago ..."

Bob Howe

Bob's response was almost immediate. "I served with No 2 Squadron from May 1969 to May

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1970 at Phan Rang and completed 260 operational missions in that time. Those times are reasonably fresh in my ageing mind as I am in the process of writing up my experiences with as much detail as I can find and in doing some web research I stumbled across your web article on your outstanding web site.



FLTLT Bob Howe, Phan Rang, Republic of South Vietnam, 1969

I live in Canberra and close by in Tuggeranong is the Air Power Development Centre which gave me a copy of the Unit History Sheets (Forms A51) which I believe they obtained from the National Archives. These contain a page for each day and on these pages are listed in time order the missions/sorties carried out for the day.

They don't contain any Magpie numbers but, as my own logbook proves, they kept faithfully to the normal "fragging" (the RAAF use of this term is explained later) sequence which began the day with Magpie 11 and concluded normally with Magpie 81 or 91, depending on whether we flew 8 or 9 missions. As far as I know all 7th Air Force tactical air (tacair) flying units, including No 2 Squadron, allocated numbers such as that and did not marry any one number to any one pilot or aircraft.

Within the USAF community, I believe only the FACs personally retained the same call-sign and number throughout, although in some cases you could get two Jade 03s when one succeeded the other. In fact, a few of my RAAF fighter pilot colleagues also served as Jade FACs.

I've attached a copy of 21 September 69 flight programme as recorded in the standard Form A.51. On that day I can confirm, from both my logbook and diary, that Ivan Grove and I flew as Magpie 41 and as you can see we are listed fourth.

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SECRET

ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE Form A11
Jan 51
 UNIT HISTORY SHEET Appendix _____

DETAIL OF OPERATIONS

(AFO 18/7/5)

From 21 / SEP / 69 to 21 / SEP / 69 By No 2 Squadron No of Sheets 1

Aircraft Type and No	Crew	Duty	DAY TIME	NIGHT REFERENCE	Description of Operation	References
A84-247	PLT LT <u>W. J. LEWIS</u> (0215390)	VIS	2.00		1. The squadron attacked one target in I corps using combat skyspot.	
	FLG OFF <u>R. J. MOLONY</u> (0112878)					
A84-228	FLG OFF <u>R. T. SIVNER</u> (0110502)	VIS	2.45		2. Seven targets were attacked using visual bombing techniques, four in III corps and three in IV corps.	
	PLT OFF <u>K. W. G. PADGETT</u> (0112430)					
A84-236	WG-ODR <u>J. A. WHITEHEAD</u> (033710)	VIS	2.00		3. 48 x 750 lb bombs were expended for an available bomb damage assessment of: a. twelve structures destroyed,	
	SQN LDR <u>B. H. HUNT</u> (022820)					b. six structures damaged,
A84-241	SQN LDR <u>I. D. GROVE</u> (034222)	VIS	2.20		c. twenty bunkers destroyed,	
	FLT LT <u>R. W. ROWE</u> (0218320)				d. thirteen bunkers damaged,	
A84-238	FLT OFF <u>A. T. SIVNER</u> (016941)	VIS	1.55		e. two secondary explosions,	
	FLT OFF <u>J. J. WILKINSON</u> (022864)				f. nine killed by air.	
A84-235	FLT OFF <u>R. D. ALLOPIN</u> (0317534)	VIS	1.35			
	FLG OFF <u>J. A. BUSHILL</u> (022170)					
A84-237	FLT OFF <u>J. M. KENNEDY</u> (0317782)	VIS	1.25			
	FLG OFF <u>L. D. BROWN</u> (0110501)					
A84-241	FLG OFF <u>S. S. WELSH</u> (0113668)	OBS		1.45		
	PLT OFF <u>R. D. HARGREAVE</u> (0117506)					

SECRET

2 Squadron's Mission Sheet for 21 September 1969

The aircraft before us was A84-236 flown by our Commanding Officer, Wing Commander John Whitehead, together with the squadron Navigation Officer/Leader, Squadron Leader Bruce Hunt. So, I'm virtually positive that your crew were our most senior pilot and navigator/bomb aimer.

You can see also that only M117 750lb bombs were used on that day, 6 each on 8 missions. All were visual day bombing missions (VIS) except for one night-time "Combat SkySpot" (CSS) which we flew under the control of a ground-based radar operator, usually in I or II Corps.

I knew both gents and as far as I know John still resides in Canberra and I believe Bruce passed away last year but I would need to confirm that. I would be pleased to follow up through my (No 2 Squadron Association) network to ascertain contact details if you wish.

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In addition I would like to discuss more about that particular day as my curiosity has been aroused further."

"If we don't write history, who will?"

Roger Lambert

Needless to say, I'd responded to Bob the next day. "Many thanks for your detailed response. I was in country with 5RAR from January 1969 to March 1970; Platoon Commander, 9 Platoon, C Company (Call-sign 33). It's pleasing to hear that you are recording many of your experiences; as the saying goes, 'If we don't write history, who will?' It's one of the reasons that I've been writing those articles for the battalion website; there are several articles on the site from me but more on the humorous side of soldiering.

I'm not familiar with the RAAF term "fragging" but I think I get your drift. "Fragging" for we infantrymen has a vastly different connotation - "fragging" derived its name from the fragmentation or shrapnel from an exploding M26 grenade, lobbed into an intensely disliked officer's or senior non-commissioned officer's tent.



WNGCDR John Whitehead, DSO and SQNLDR Bruce Hunt after their last mission

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So, it seems that **Magpie 31**, A84-236, was flown by the CO no less, Wing Commander John Whitehead, together with the squadron Navigation Officer/Leader, Squadron Leader Bruce Hunt, the squadron's most senior pilot and navigator/bombardier. It sounds as if we were in very good hands but then the same could be said for all you 2 Sqn pilots and navigators flying the missions in Vietnam. The squadron has a solid and well-earned reputation with both the Australians and Americans alike for discipline, determination and precision bombing skills.

And thanks for confirming that they were 750 lb bombs. I would have been disappointed to have to tell my boys that were merely 500 pounders (*tongue firmly in cheek*).

That's sad that Bruce has passed away if that is the case; we're losing too many veterans of that conflict but I guess we're all getting on in years. It would be good to catch up with John at some stage to put a face to the name, to shake his hand and to thank him for his accurate bombing in concert with Bruce that day. In that light, I'd be very pleased if you follow up through the 2 Sqn Association regarding contact details.

"I'd still like to know who my blonde 'friend' was and whether he survived the conflict."

I'm happy to discuss the events of that day although some details are a little hazy after all this time. I'm still tickled pink that thanks to you, the final part of the puzzle may have fallen into place — at least from an Aussie perspective. I'd still like to know who my blonde 'friend' was and whether he survived the conflict."

Bob Howe

Bob replied the next day "Regarding the term "fragging" from an Air Force perspective, it comes from the Operations Order (Ops Order) where each element that defined a mission was regarded as a fragment of the Operations Order and became common usage for tactical air missions in South Vietnam; i.e. each mission was 'fragged', being the authorisation to launch the mission.

I've made contact with John Whitehead who's currently overseas and who advises that he will check his logbook when he returns shortly."

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With Bob's news about his contact with John Whitehead, I now had a very positive feeling that thanks to his contact with Ted Harrison, we may well have closed the chapter in my quest to identify the crew of Magpie 31. And true to his earlier 'heads-up', Bob posed a series of questions to assist with his own writing of his experiences. I warned Bob that I'd do my best to answer his questions, reminding him that we're talking events of some 44 years ago.

What follows are the questions posed by Bob Howe and answers by Roger Lambert:

Q. When you said you had no qualms about directing the FAC, I understood that most times a "Possum" LOH (light observation helicopter) was in the vicinity with 1 ATF operations and would act as the go-between for you on the ground, the FAC and ourselves. I presume that there was no LOH around that day. Was this usual or rare?

A. SOP for directing air support was to delineate your position on the ground through the use of coloured smoke. We always carried a variety of coloured smoke grenades (red, green, yellow, purple). The one colour smoke was used to indicate the flank of the platoon's position and therefore our frontage in relation to the enemy. This always applied whether one was being supported by "Bushranger" gunships or fast jets. It was quite normal for ground troops to communicate directly with the gunships and in my case with the FAC, Jade 03, on 21 September 69. The "Bushranger" or in this case, FAC, would come up on the Company net frequency so we had direct communications with him. Once communications were established, that's when FAC would ask us to throw smoke to delineate our position and then ask for range and direction to the target if he didn't have a visual. He'd then roll in and fire a Willy-Pete (WP) rocket to mark the target and then ask for any correction from us. In this case on 21 September 69, we'd struck a large bunker complex (we didn't know how big until later that evening). We'd pulled back some ways while in contact and I'd asked Company Headquarters for artillery support. If memory serves me correctly, 7 and 8 Platoons were busy with their own contacts and the guns were already in support of those actions. That's when we were advised that there was a Magpie available and could provide close air support (CAS). That's a rather long-winded answer to your question and I hope that covers off on it for you. 21 September 69 was the only occasion during my tour with 9 Platoon, C Company, 5 RAR that I had the use of CAS.

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Cessna O-2, USAF 67-21368, Luscombe Field, Nui Dat, 1969

I had, however, earlier in the tour, had the opportunity of actually flying with a USAF FAC (Cessna O-2) out of Nui Dat. We put in an airstrike on some VC market gardens to the North using a flight of Cessna A-37 Dragonflies armed with napalm. Our CO, LTCOL Khan, in his wisdom, arranged for Platoon Commanders to go on these sorties to get a better understanding of the problems that a FAC could face in flying his aircraft, putting WP onto a target, directing the fast jets, and then going in to do a Bomb Damage Assessment (BDA). From this, I had a reasonable idea of what Jade 03 would require from me with the Magpie strike.

Q. Were you able to talk directly with the FAC, i.e. having been given his call-sign and frequency beforehand or did you communicate via a third party?

A. Yes, I had direct contact with the FAC at all times once he came on station. Jade 03 would have been given our frequency by Battalion HQ; my Company Commander had two radios nets — one was called the Command Net for communications between the CO (Battalion Headquarters) and his Company Commanders and the other was the Company Internal Net for communications between the OC and his Platoon Commanders. The OC, MAJ Claude Ducker, MC, would have been communicating with Battalion Headquarters (Zero Alpha) on

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the Command Net and that's where frequencies would be exchanged. There is always the possibility of course that Task Force HQ was also involved where CAS either from the USAF or RAAF was involved. I still have the vivid memory of Jade 03 coming up on the Company frequency with "33. This is Jade 03, over." (33 you'd recall was my Platoon call-sign — Company HQ was 3, 7 Platoon was 31 and 8 Platoon was 32).

Q. Could you see the FAC at all and the Canberra?

A. Yes, we had glimpses of the FAC through the jungle canopy and we could hear his engines as he put his WP into the bunker complex. We never did see Canberra.

Q. Could you hear the Canberra bomber at all, either on its race-track pattern or on the final run-in? Unless there was cloud cover when we would fly under down to as low as 1,000' above target, we normally bombed from 3,000' at 270 knots Indicated Air Speed, which equated to something like 300 knots ground speed.

A. I don't recall hearing the Canberra. We relied on Jade 03 to advise us that the Magpie was commencing the bomb run.

Q. We were normally told with Troops-in-contact (TIC) missions to fly in a particular direction on our strike run(s) to minimize risk to friendlies on the ground. Furthermore, we wouldn't bomb until we saw and identified friendly smoke — were you aware of Magpie 31's bombing pattern and run-in heading?

A. No, we weren't aware of the Magpie's bombing pattern but I vaguely remember that Jade 03 said he was coming in from the North when he told us that the Canberra was commencing its bombing run. My recollection is that the bunker complex backed onto a water course that ran roughly North-South and we'd been heading roughly North-West when we came into contact.

Q. In regard to distances, how far were you away from the target (presumably where the FAC dropped his WP smoke)?

A. This one's a little more difficult to answer. For example, the fire of an Artillery Field

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battery of 105mm howitzers covered an area of approximately 150 x 150 metres or 200 metres with a linear target. The planning safety distance for the same weapon (105 mm gun) for covering fire was 250 metres. However, as the Infantry commander on the ground, I had the right to call the fire in closer, depending upon the situation (one never did this however if you were facing down the throat of the guns but it was certainly feasible when the fire support was coming from a flank or overhead). An example would be the battle of Long Tan (I'm pretty sure I've read this as fact) where, as the battle was escalating, the Infantry called the regimental fire in so close that the Artillery Regimental Commander at Nui Dat initially refused but was then overruled by Commander 1 Australian task Force (1ATF). Now I vaguely recall that the safety distance for CAS was 750 to 1,000 metres when using 500lb, 750lb or 1,000lb bombs and when troops were not dug in or protected (e.g. in armoured personnel carriers). Once again however distances could be varied by the FAC and the ground commander depending on the gravity of the situation. We were not dug in or protected other than the scant protection afforded by the jungle itself. My guess is (and it is only a guess) that we were but 500 metres from the bunker complex. I do remember that we were on slightly higher ground than the complex which worked in our favour. Nevertheless, when those six 750 lb bombs hit, we all thought that the world had come to an end. The crescendo of the explosions, the concussive effect, live shrapnel flying around, and the jungle seemingly being torn part around us while we hugged the earth for dear life is something one never forgets. Within 20 minutes of the air strike, we were in contact again and this time I was able to use artillery support. All of C Company were in contacts on and off during the day and it wasn't until around 1700 -1730 hrs that we eventually got into the bunker complex. From memory, we counted some 45 bunkers.



750 lb wing tip bomb harnessed to the port wing of an RAAF Canberra Bomber

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Q. Were you told by the FAC to take cover during the Magpie strike?

A. Not really, as apart from the jungle around us, there was no real cover save the odd depression in the ground. I can but assume that Jim Farris, the FAC pilot, had done his homework based on our coloured smoke. I'll ask Jim his recollection of events as he was the one in the air with the best view of proceedings.

Q. Can you remember what standard safety distances were observed to ensure your safety when such air strikes were on?

A. As above. I think it was 750 to 1,000 metres.

Q. In regard to Bomb Damage Assessment (BDA), you mentioned that the FAC did that assessment. Were you advised what it was?

A. Yes, Jade 03 did a BDA but no real details back to us. I suspect once again that the assessment would have gone back on the Command Net. Of course, once we got into the complex, we were able to do our own assessment and that would have gone back through Company HQ to Battalion HQ and on to HQ 1 ATF.

Q. Presumably your troops or somebody else (who?) conducted a more comprehensive survey of the bombed site to get a detailed picture and collect intelligence. To your knowledge was there any follow up with No 2 Squadron as to a more precise estimate of damage caused by Magpie 31 (assuming that the FAC's BDA might have differed from later inspection).

A. Yes, we conducted a thorough search of the complex and provided situation and after-action reports on same. Taking pictures was not normal practice. I'm not able to say whether there was any correlation between our assessment and FAC's. We were not privy to such activities as these actions would take place at a Battalion HQ and HQ 1 ATF.

Q. Were there other tactical air missions put in as well as Magpie 31, and which might have made determining BDA for each aircraft somewhat difficult?

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A. As mentioned earlier, 9 Sqn "Bushrangers" were also in action that day in support of C Company. "Bushranger 71" and "Bushranger 72" comprised the Light Fire Team."

Roger Lambert

Bob was most appreciative of my comprehensive response. In replying, while we awaited John Whitehead's RTA, he said that he had noticed that my original article "Blondes, Bombs and Bunkers" showed a Canberra in flight without bombs. He very kindly supplied the image of A84-228, taken by himself showing a M117 750lb bomb on the wing tip, which is now regarded as one of the best air-to-air shots of a Magpie in Vietnam. Ted very kindly substituted this image to support the original article.



GAF Canberra A84-228 (Image by Bob Howe)

"By now I was eagerly looking forward to...confirmation that I'd finally found "my Magpie" aircrew."

By now I was eagerly looking forward to Bob's contact with John and confirmation that I'd finally found "my Magpie" aircrew. In the first of several coincidences arising from our Magpie 31 experience, a little further research revealed that if GAF Canberra A84-236 is currently

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preserved at the RAAF Museum, Point Cook, Victoria.

Bob Howe wrote to John Whitehead:

"Upon surfing the website last week, I came across an article written by a 5 RAR platoon leader who graphically described a mission whereby Magpie 31 under the direction of Jade 03 delivered its bombs close by to his troops when they came across the enemy and had detected a large bunker complex in the ATF's AO.

The day was 21 September 1969 and upon looking up the relevant Form A51 (attached) I found out that Ivan Grove and I flew in Magpie 41.

Assuming that the daily records religiously listed crews in a Magpie 11 to 81 sequence, my logical conclusion was that you and Bruce Hunt were flying as Magpie 31 on that day in A84-236 and the subject of his article posted on his website titled Blondes, Bombs and bunkers.

If you concur with my finding would you be interested in communicating with Roger Lambert and help him finish off his story?"



Bob Howe in warfighting gear, Phan Rang 1969

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And then the news that I had been waiting for all this time — contact from John Whitehead.

John Whitehead wrote to Bob Howe as follows:

"Have arrived home and checked my log-book, Bruce Hunt and I did fly Canberra A84-236 on 21st September 1969: Duty — Visual Bombing. It's so long ago, I don't recall the particular mission details but I do remember a rather spectacular result on a mission into the ATF area about that time — a month or so before my RTA. It stands out too because I flew only a handful of missions into the ATF area (out of 256 ops), and they were usually fairly dull by comparison.

Quite an interesting account Roger Lambert has written, and rewarding to hear about the mission from another point of view. I'm just grateful that we were able to accomplish such a good result without any loss to our side — that's something that always worried me, and Bruce Hunt of course. Pity that Bruce is no longer with us — he would have been so pleased to have heard the full story. However, I'll pass the article on to Juneve (Ed. Bruce's widow).

I note that Roger Lambert would like to get in touch, and I'd be happy with that. If you have his email address please let him know and pass on mine."

“The wheels were set in motion for the ‘bomber’ and the ‘bombed’ to finally make contact after 44 years.”

With that email exchange, the wheels were set in motion for the 'bomber' and the 'bombed' to finally make contact after 44 years. Having thanked Bob for his assistance to date, armed with John's contact details, I (Roger Lambert) wrote as follows:

"Thank you for confirming that Bruce Hunt and yourself did fly Canberra A84-236 as Magpie 31 on that day. As I said to Bob in earlier correspondence, we were in very good hands that day what with the Commanding Officer 2 Sqn and your senior navigation officer/leader — in fact, we couldn't have been in better hands! It's sad that Bruce is no longer with us to hear the story from the platoon commander's perspective.

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Roger Lambert

A little about me so you have an idea with whom you're dealing.

I was called up for National Service (NS) in April 1966 and was successful in being selected for officer training at the Officer Training Unit, Scheyville. I graduated as a Second Lieutenant in the Infantry Corps and was initially posted to 1 Recruit Training Battalion, Kapooka (Wagga Wagga). Towards the end of my two year NS commitment, I was posted to the 5th Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment (5 RAR) at Holsworthy to put be close to my place of "enlistment", Newcastle.

5 RAR had just returned home from their first tour of duty in Vietnam. It was during this time prior to discharge that I learnt that the battalion was to gear up for a second tour. And like any young twenty off year old lad, being full of bravado, I applied for and was granted a Short Service Commission to enable me to accompany the Battalion when it returned to SVN.

Having spent six months being trained as an Infantry platoon commander and honing my leadership skills at 1 RTB, I wanted to prove myself as a platoon commander in combat. The rest, as they say, is history. I not only completed the second tour as the commander of 9 Platoon, C Company, 5 RAR but on RTA, I took out a permanent commission and in all, completed 26 most enjoyable years in the Army.

I had a succession of administrative, command and instructional postings throughout my career as well as having been fortunate enough to attend the Army Staff College in 1981. I "retired" (read, I took a redundancy) in 1992 with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel having been responsible for both Victoria Barracks at Paddington and the District Support Unit at Randwick. My final role was as a member of the Defence Regional Support Review (DRSR), initially developing the DRSR report for metropolitan Sydney and then being responsible to lead the team covering the Northern Territory. I was fortunate to be in Darwin at the time of the 50th Anniversary of the bombing of Darwin by the Japanese which made my two-month project all the more enjoyable.

After taking 12 months off to renovate our house, Rhonda, my wife, decided that I should go back to work and start contributing to the household income once more. I joined the then Environment Protection Authority in April 1994 in a role not dissimilar to that I had with Victoria and Randwick Barracks. Almost 20 years later and six reorganizations, I'm still here

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working for a living but relishing the thought of retirement, this time properly!

I'm not sure how much information that Bob has passed on to you but it has been a quest of mine to try and identify the Canberra aircrew that supported us that day 44 years ago on 21 September 1969. Thanks to Bob's research and his contact with the editor (webmaster) of the 5 RAR Association website, Ted Harrison, Bob has proved to be the conduit in bringing my quest to a successful conclusion.

I was able to track down the pilot of Jade 03 some two years ago through the USAF FAC Association. **Jim Farris**, USAF Retired, was the pilot of Jade 03 (Cessna O-2) based out of Nui Dat and has a good recollection of the events of 21 September 1969.



CAPT Jim Farris, Forward Air Controller, USAF

Jim has also been assisting me with a more sombre article earlier in the tour when we were tasked with the recovery of the body of the pilot of another Cessna O-2 (Kenny FAC) that was hit by friendly naval gun fire and which crashed into the Long Hai mountains. His Marine Corps observer was also killed.

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The crew of Magpie 31 had eluded me until now, thanks to Bob’s contact with me. And here we are, 44 years later and able to correspond about an isolated but important incident in Vietnam in 1969. I’m not sure if Bob had told you but my troops have never really forgiven me for that airstrike (and the only direct Close Air Support in our 13 month tour of duty other than “Bushrangers”) and they take great delight in raising the issue with me at platoon reunions and the like. Jokes aside, we were very grateful for Bruce’s and your support on that occasion as I remain confident to this day that it made the difference between success and who knows what.

Anyway, that’s enough from me for the moment. I would really like to catch up at some stage for a coldie and a chat, and to compare notes from opposite ends of the spectrum so to speak — air and ground.”

John Whiteheads interesting and informative response was as follows:

"It was good to hear from you last week — apologies for my tardy response but I've just got back from a few weeks overseas and have been catching up with everything.

I found it very interesting reading your account of the action with C Company on 21st September '69. We of course, in the air, really didn't have any idea of what was going on on the ground, other than having the FAC say that there were troops in contact. One never knew just how close the opponents were in such situations, and I was quite surprised to hear that you were very close indeed!

Your account gives a broad idea of what happened on that day so far as you were concerned, and it seems as if there were a few close shaves for your people. Bruce Hunt and I, on the other hand, flew back to Phan Rang, had a nice hot shower, and went either to the office or to the Mess and had a cool beer. Quite a contrast! I see from my Log Book that on each of the next several days we went out and did much the same thing again, although this could have been in either I Corps or IV Corps, or both. We did this relentlessly with maybe one or two days per week without operational flights. In hindsight, it was a busy but satisfying life and I'm glad I was in the Air Force and not in the Army!

And in return, a little about me. I spent 32 years in the Air Force, and, like you, took voluntary retirement in 1981 as an Air Commodore, aged 48 - my last posting being Director

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General of Air Force Manpower. Having graduated from the RAAF College in 1953 my first posting was into Korea flying Meteors with 77 Squadron. This was during the Armistice period and things were quiet. After that I had 2 years on exchange (in the Cold War days) with the RAF flying Meteors and Hunter 6s. After that a few months with the A-Bomb trials unit at Edinburgh and Maralinga, and then as ADC to the AOC Operational Command. After that there were a number of postings to various units, including flying Canberras with 1 and 6 Squadrons at Amberley. After which of course, I ended up in Vietnam as CO No. 2 Squadron from November '68 to November '69. After that there were the usual postings, including CO Aircraft Research and Development Unit, Australian Defence Advisor Kuala Lumpur, and Commandant RAAF Academy.

It was an unusual situation for me in Kuala Lumpur in 1975 that I found myself dealing with the Malaysian Government in seeking approvals for RAAF Hercules to land and refuel at Butterworth during the evacuation of Saigon!! Life was interesting for a period when the Malaysian Government eventually refused permission for such flights.

After I left the Air Force, I was based in Sydney for 10 years, firstly as FAS Policy and Admin with the Office of the Supervising Scientist for the Alligator Rivers Region. We had our HQ in Bondi Junction, and offices in Canberra and Darwin, and a Research Institute at Jabiru. Six years of that was enough and then I spent the next 4 years with the NSW Air Transport Council licensing interstate air services. And we have now enjoyed 20 years of retirement in the Gold Coast Hinterland.

My wife, Adrienne, and I will be in Sydney during early October. We will be staying in the City.

I'm glad after all these years that you have persevered and tracked us down. Bruce Hunt's widow also lives on the Gold Coast - when she is not in India visiting their daughter, so we have forwarded on all the details of your account and various communications to her."

Having exchanged contact details, we agree that we would catch up in Sydney. At last, my quest to identify the aircrew of Magpie 31 had ended successfully. It's somewhat sad that Bruce Hunt is no longer with us but at least his widow will have gained a further insight into his tour of duty in Vietnam and type of close air support that 2 Squadron provided.

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I mentioned earlier that there were coincidences throughout this unfolding story of my quest to identify the crew of Magpie 31; some may say that they are a wee bit spooky to say the least. In previous correspondence, I'd asked both John and Bob if they could send me images that would support my article. Bob Howe sent me an image of himself in 'war-fighting gear' standing in front of a bombed up Canberra at Phan Rang. On close examination of the nose wheel door, the Canberra was identified as A84-234. Now, not only is "our Magpie", A84-236, preserved at the RAAF Museum, Point Cook, Victoria but coincidentally, the nose section of A84-234 is preserved there as well. And if that is not enough, John knows Colin Khan, both from at home and in country ... it's almost as if all of this was meant to be drawn together at some stage. As I said to John at one stage, the links to 5 RAR through his acquaintance with the then LTCOL Khan, his CAS of my platoon and the preservation of A84-236 are uncanny to say the least.

"I remain so pleased to this day that it was a 2 Sqn Canberra that provided the CAS to my platoon that day."

From a personal perspective, I remain so pleased to this day that it was a 2 Sqn Canberra that provided the CAS to my platoon that day. While my original article tends to make light of the situation, I was aware of 2 Squadron's reputation for precision bombing, so we couldn't have been in better hands that day. Mind you, none of us knew what to expect when six 750 lb bombs rained down on that bunker complex.

I also hold the 9 Sqn boys in high regard as well. Their troop lifts, Dustoff and "Bushranger" activities were all very welcomed by we troops on operations. That very distinct 'wokka wokka' of an Iroquois passing overhead still evokes many memories to this day.

I mentioned before that "Bushranger 71" and "Bushranger 72" provided gunship support to C Company during a series of running contacts involving 7, 8 and 9 platoons as well as CHQ. I obtained a copy of the 9 Sqn Unit History Sheet (AFO 18/F/5) Form A 50 from the Australian War Memorial.

On 21 September 1969, the record shows that Iroquois A2-377 and A2-383 flew gun missions that day of three and five sorties respectively. They were the only gun missions of the day. "Bushranger 71" was flown by Brown, Lea, Robinson and Carrier while "Bushranger 72" was

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flown by Tardent, Thompson, Pinkerton and Neil. I’ve made the assumption the pilot and co-pilot are listed first and the door gunners second. I’ve set myself another task to identify these crews with a view to catching up in the near future.

And the final coincidence in all of this? Iroquois A2-377 is also preserved at the RAAF Museum, Point Cook, Victoria!

So there you have it. Never underestimate the power of the Internet and the value of a website such as our very own 5 RAR Association.

Was the effort worth it? A resounding yes. Not only was it very satisfying in tracking down the aircrew that provided the CAS to us that day on 21 September 1969 but it also preserves one more slice of history for future generations, researchers and historians. It has also been a very personal, rewarding experience to show the human side of an event 44 years ago in SE Asia, not only from my own and my family’s perspective but also those of the Whiteheads and the Hunts. Perhaps John’s wife, Adrienne, put the latter aspect best when she wrote:

“Having forwarded on your article and correspondence to Juneve (Ed: Bruce's widow) and their daughter, Susan, in Delhi — I made the remark, knowing Juneve as well as I did, that reading it all might bring a tear to her eye. She rang from India to say 'Tear!!! We both cried like babies!' They are thrilled to hear about all that has developed.”

The Whiteheads and the Lamberts got together in Sydney in October 2013. After 44 years, the pilot of 2 Sqn Canberra A2-236, Magpie 31, and the Platoon Commander of 9 Platoon finally met.

"Magpie 31 — Part 3" will cover the 'reunion' of the Whiteheads and the Lamberts. The follow-up article will provide coverage of the get together in Sydney as well as images of AIRCDRE (rtd) John Whitehead and LTCOL (rtd) Roger Lambert, and our respective 'sunray minors'¹.

¹ "Sunray Minor" refers to the second-in-command. For example, as the Platoon Commander, I would be referred to as "Sunray" whereas the Platoon Sergeant would be referred to as "Sunray Minor". In radio parlance, a transmission say from the Company Commander (in this case Callsign 30) to my radio operator would go something along the lines "33 this is 30. Fetch Sunray, over." If I was incapacitated, the call would be for my Platoon Sergeant and would go "33 this is 30. Fetch Sunray Minor, over."

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History of GAF Canberra Mk20 A84-236

- **First flight 21 September 1956**
- **Delivered 30 October 1956.**
- **Served with 2 Sqn, ARDU and No.1 Bomber Conversion Unit**
- **Served with 2 Sqn in Vietnam as part of USAF 35th Tactical Fighter Wing; arrived at Phan Rang Air Base 16 April 1967 after a two hour flight from Butterworth, Malaysia**
- **Returned to Darwin 04 June 1971**
- **Struck off 27 July 1973 at Amberley, Queensland**
- **Approval given for conversion to an exhibit for RAAF museum 27 July 1982**

Canberra A84-236 is currently on display at RAAF Museum, Pt. Cook, Victoria and is maintained in a taxiing condition.

History of Bell UH-1H Iroquois A2-377 (Believed to have been built as a D model but modified to a H model prior to delivery)

- **Delivered 06 February 1968 to 9 Sqn in Vietnam**
- **First sortie in Vietnam on 10 February 1968 (Crew; Thompson, Davidson, Neatherway and O'Rourke)**
- **Operated as UH-1H “Bushranger” in Vietnam**
- **Served in the Sinai with the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) in 1982-1986.**
- **The aircraft was lodged aboard HMAS Tobruk in Brisbane with some personnel on 16 February 1982; Australian Group known as Australian Contingent to Multinational Forces and Observers (ACMFO), based at El Gorah, Sinai**
- **Transferred to Army Aviation December 1989/January 1990**
- **Deployed to the Solomon Islands on operation Anode on the 05 August 2003 as a part of ANZAC Sqn which consisted of 171 Op Spt Sqn (4 x UH-1H), 3 Sqn RNZAF (4 x UH-1H) and 35 Sqn Det RAAF (3 x Caribou)**

Officially retired to the Point Cook museum on the 30 June 2007; it was flown down from Oakey to Canberra by CAPT Brad Wheeler, LT Glenn Miller, and SGT Rob Knox, arriving in Canberra at 1705 hrs on the 29 June 2007 landing at Russell Offices; the Iroquois departed RAAF Fairbairn on the 30 June 2007 in a three ship formation with the crew as CAPT Brad Wheeler, AVM Angus

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Houston (CDF), and SGT Rob Knox (the CDF flew the helicopter almost the entire 3.3 hours it took to get to Point Cook, doing all take offs and landings).

A2-377 will be repainted into the original colour scheme for display at the Point Cook Museum in the Vietnam display; the aircraft is currently on display in “Bushranger” configuration but wearing Army titles.



Bell UH-1H Iroquois A2-377, 9 Sqn ‘Bushranger’, Vietnam 1969

Foot Note: The delivery of A2-377 to RAAF Point Cook was the last time that AVM Houston was the Captain in Charge (CIC) of a military aircraft.

**MAGPIE 31, PART 3 AND THE FINAL PART OF THIS STORY WILL BE CONTINUED
IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF THE PHAN RANG NEWSLETTER.**

**To hear Radio and aircrew intercom transmissions No 2 (Bomber) Squadron
Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), South Vietnam, 1969-1970**

[CLICK HERE](#)

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The Battle of Prey Torteng

Part 2



By Bruce Gordon

The second day of airstrikes in the Battle of Prey Torteng in Cambodia during the Vietnam War.

After expending my bombs at Prey Torteng on the first day I returned to Phan Rang where I could rearm and refuel.



Napalm burning after the first day of bombing.



I skipped a day or two not going to Prey Torteng but my friends flew many missions and said there was a big battle going on there. On a day that I didn't go to Prey Torteng one of my friends was shot down over the town...he got a little distance from the town and was picked up by the Cambodia Army and taken to Pheum Phen and was back with us OK in about a week with lots of stories.

Soon I was on my way back to Prey Torteng this time with a load of 500 lb bombs. We contacted the Forward Air Controller (FAC) and he told us the whole story. North Vietnamese Army had captured the entire town and the Cambodia forces had retreated to a school to the south of the town. We'd go help them later, but first we had to get rid of an anti-aircraft gun that was in the middle of the town. There was a large flat roofed building in the middle of the

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town that looked like a three story department store. Somehow the North Vietnamese had gotten an anti-aircraft gun up there on the middle of the roof and were shooting at us.



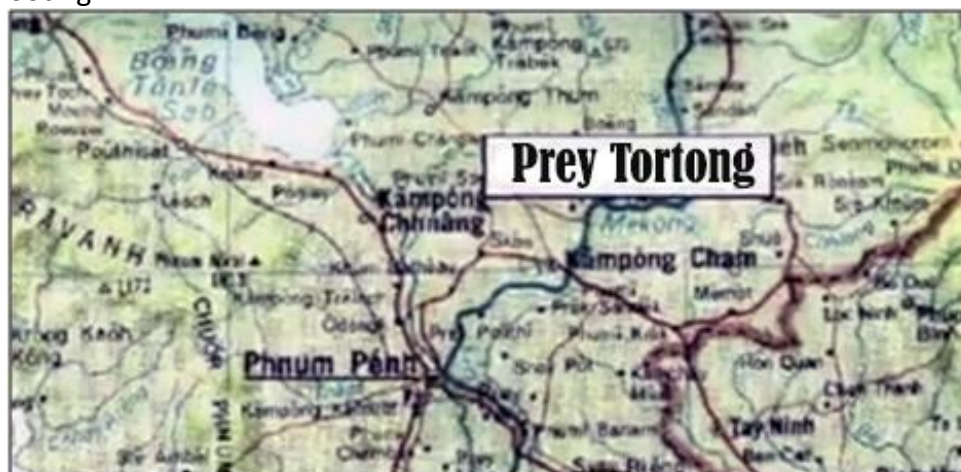
F-100 headed to Prey Tortong, Cambodia



Forward Air Controller Skymaster aircraft.

I armed two of my 500 lb bombs and rolled in for a dive bombing attack. Attacking an anti-aircraft gun is always dangerous and as I went in I could see the muzzle flashes as they shot off me. I pickled off my bombs, pulled off and looked back and I had missed. My two bombs fell in the parking lot with a tremendous explosion, but the gun was not hurt.

My wing man went in next. He pressed his attack closer and sent his two bombs crashing through the roof of the building. His bombs had a slightly delayed action fuze and blew out the lower floors of the building. The roof sagged, but remained more or less intact, but the gun stopped shooting.



We turned our attention to the south of the town where a Cambodian lieutenant was holed up with 200 men of which only 40 were not wounded. It looked like a normal school house with a hedge around it. The North Vietnamese were in the hedge preparing to attack the school house. We dropped our remaining bombs on the hedge and then came back with our 20mm

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cannon and strafed the hedge until we had no more ammunition left. As we turned off back for home we left the lieutenant and his men to their fate. I worried about them and thought I never would hear anything about them again.

Two weeks later I read in the Far-East edition of Time Magazine that a French reporter had gone in with Vietnamese rangers and relieved the town. They went in by helicopter, landed just south of the school house, moved in and rescued the lieutenants and then drove on into the city. The North Vietnamese ran in front of them. They had had enough! The reporter estimated that there were about 1,500 North Vietnamese dead in the town. On the roof of the building in the center of town they found a North Vietnamese anti-aircraft gun. The crew was dead, they had been chained to the gun so they couldn't run.

Note: This and the following story, along with graphics, were extracted from videos posted to YouTube.com by the author and used with his permission. Many more stories told by Bruce Gordon of his own experiences and some from his friends are available at [“Spirit of Attack”](#).



By Bruce Gordon

Incoming! Incoming! Incoming fire everybody down.

When I was flying F-100s in Vietnam 1970 to 1971 we had multiple rocket attacks and other attacks, such as from mortars or in the case when we accidentally dropped some aerial mines on our own airfield.

I'll cover the rocket attacks and the other incidents in another story.

Phan Rang AB is on the South East coast of Vietnam, a very good location, from where our

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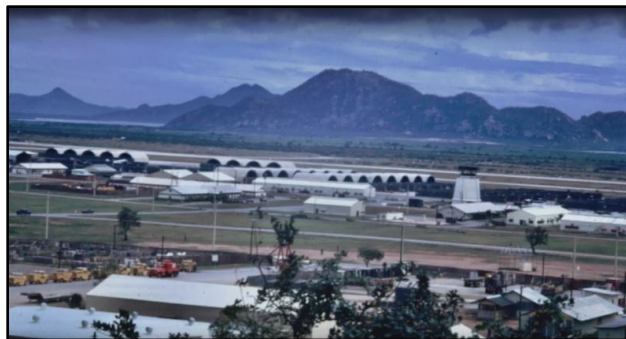
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fighters could cover all of South Vietnam and way into Cambodia.

The primary fighter was the F-100. The picture shows one taxiing out with a typical load of 4 500lb bombs and you can see its big drop tanks and it had 4 20mm cannons under the nose. In the background you can see our protection against rocket attacks. There’s the steel blast wall and behind them the reinforced concrete shelters that we put our fighters in.



Phan Rang is on a rather pleasant position on the coast. The Vietnamese called it “Happy Valley”. Here we could get our supplies in easily by ship. In the picture you can see the many concrete shelters for the four squadrons of F-100 fighters and the control tower.



Looking inland you can see our main housing area with our Base Exchange, post office and base laundry. In the distance is the command center. I lived in one of those barracks; we

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called it a “Hooch”. We had a bed, a desk, lamp, chair and a closet. My hooch had a blast wall around it which would protect me from shrapnel if I was in bed or down on the floor. In the back ground you can see the dark mountains where the Viet Cong could set up their rockets and fire down upon us.



The Viet Cong’s favorite weapon was a rocket that was about 100lbs. It could be split into two pieces. One man could carry the rocket motor and another man would carry the war head. It could be assembled on site and set up with a bi-pod made of bamboo sticks to hold it up and pointed

generally in the general direction of the base. They had a range of about one mile and were very inaccurate. They could land just about anywhere. The rocket launch caused a cloud of smoke and debris.

We had a South Korean artillery unit with us and they would keep an eye out for signs of a rocket launch. They would promptly fire artillery back at the spot. To avoid our artillery the Viet Cong would set a timer on the rockets so that they would fire after the VC left the area and were no longer in danger from our counter battery fire.

In November 1970 I was in my hooch at my desk when I heard an explosion followed immediately by the air-raid warning siren. I took cover and in a few moments the all clear was sounded and I went out to investigate what had happened.



At the edge of the road at our shopping center I found a small crater where the rocket had hit. The crater was small and unimpressive. I expected much more from the 122mm rocket. But as I looked around the shrapnel had hit many buildings. The base laundry and in the photo below, taken weeks later, you can see the many white patches on the side of the building where the shrapnel

had gone in. I hear that the shrapnel had wrecked all of our washing machines, but nobody had been hurt by the shrapnel. I heard that we had one casualty though, a sergeant in a pickup

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truck had been driving near the laundry and he either heard or saw the rocket coming in and he dove out of the truck to get down so fast that he broke his leg jumping out of the truck. After sunset on the night of the attack I went and stood in the little bomb crater and looked around at all the buildings around me. The buildings were all lit from the people activity in them and I was astounded the little bits of light shown from all the buildings showing where the shrapnel had gone in. The rocket made a small crater but the hundreds of shrapnel holes in the buildings showed the tremendous importance of getting down when a rocket is coming in.



The shrapnel effects on the buildings made me think of our own bombs where if after troops in the open, particularly in marshy areas, we put a three foot fuse extender, they called it. It's a little pipe with a fuse at the very end of it on the front of our bombs so that the bomb explodes three feet in the air and gives a slight downward trajectory of the blast so that the shrapnel goes after the troops that may be lying down. If we are after troops that are dug in or may be in fortified bunkers we would not use a fuse extender but would use .025 second delay fuse on the front of our bombs so that it would dig a bigger crater that would go for bunkers down below.

BRUCE GORDON BIOGRAPHY

Bruce got his Wings at Laredo AFB, Texas and went to Advanced fighter pilot training at Moody AFB, Georgia, flying the F-86L. He first went supersonic in the F-86L in a vertical dive in full afterburner! His first operational unit was flying the F-102 at Spokane, Washington. He transferred to F-102s at Elmendorf AFB, Alaska, where he really learned to FLY! Alaskan airspace was not controlled by the FAA, and "targets" made dives and turns not permitted in controlled airspace -- and fighters responded in kind.

The F-102 was an advanced fighter, with a J-57 engine and the best interceptor radar of its day.

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Active scrambles against Russian bombers around Alaska were common - and bad weather was common. Bruce clearly remembers landing on an icy runway and skidding 180 degrees, going down the runway backwards! He became expert in the radar and computer systems and was selected to fly the new F-106.

F-106 training at Tyndall AFB, Florida led to assignment with the 94th Fighter Interceptor Squadron at Selfridge AFB, Michigan. He was the first pilot to shoot down a BOMARC missile coming at him head-on at 55,000 feet with a closing rate of 2,000 miles per hour! He was very interested in aircraft systems, and became a Maintenance Officer and Functional Check Pilot for the F-106 flying Mach 2 missions. The Vietnam War had started, and the F-106's excellent maneuverability and attack radar made it a possible contender for the air war over Vietnam. Bruce received fighter tactics training, and soon was an Instructor in fighter tactics for the F-106. His squadron was deployed to Korea, where his flight of four F-106s very nearly engaged 20 North Korean MiGs - but the MiGs turned back!

The Vietnam War demanded more pilots. As a single-seat fighter pilot, Bruce went to Luke AFB and transitioned to the F-100. In September 1971 he flew briefly with the 309th TFS at Tuy Hoa before joining the 612th TFS at Phan Rang in October 1971.

Bruce flew tactical strike missions almost every day. His Maintenance Officer background was useful in solving a problem with dud high-drag bombs, but mostly he flew his 132 combat missions as a flight leader. Many of these are covered in his book, "[THE SPIRIT OF ATTACK](#)", available on Amazon.com. He has also made over 30 videos which are available on YouTube here: [SPIRIT OF ATTACK page](#).

While flying these missions, Bruce wanted to tell the maintenance crews about what happened -- but was restrained because so many of the missions were in Laos and Cambodia and were secret. The passage of time has declassified these missions, and Bruce looks forward to telling the Phan Rang crews just what he was doing with those F-100s that you prepared day after day!

Doug's Comments: I hope that you enjoyed this newsletter and if you have any comments or would like to submit a story, just send it to me. This newsletter was composed and all graphics by **Douglas Severt**. To see a list of all previous newsletters click [here](#). To unsubscribe to Phan Rang News, reply to mailto:dougsevert@cox.net and put

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