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2 Squadron RAAF

2 Squadron RAAF

When eight Canberra jet bombers of 2 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), landed at Phan Rang air base in South Vietnam in April 1967, the squadron had already been serving in south-east Asia for nine years. In July 1958 it had been sent to Butterworth, Malaya, to relieve 1 Squadron, as part of the Far East Strategic Reserve. 1 Squadron had been the mainstay of the Commonwealth air operations in Malaya during the Malayan Emergency; by the time 2 Squadron arrived the communist insurgency was all but over. The squadron did, however, fly some missions, including several large strikes against the communist terrorist. On 2 October 1958 five of its Canberra bombers bombed three communist camps, believed to be reoccupied, near Ipoh. A report on the bombing mission noted “the devastation caused was so complete that it was impossible to assess the result”. The squadron remained at Butterworth during the Indonesian Confrontation.

Phan Rang, 260 kilometres north-east of Saigon, was the capital of Ninh Thuan province. The base was situated 13 kilometres from the city and was a “giant complex” covering more than 27 square kilometres. It had only recently been completed when 2 Squadron arrived and was home to the United States Air Force’s 35th Tactical Fighter Wing. The first of the squadron’s Canberra bombers landed at Phan Rang on 19 April and flew their first mission on 23 April. For the next four years the squadron flew an average of eight missions a day, seven days a week. Unlike the 1st Australian Task Force in Phuoc Tuy province, which operated independently of American forces, 2 Squadron was integrated into the 35th Tactical Fighter Wing, although its missions were restricted to targets in South Vietnam.

For the first few months the squadron mostly flew “combat sky spot” missions, where aircraft were guided by ground radar to a target and told when to drop their bombs. Most of the flights were flown at night and tended to be routine and boring. In September the squadron began low-level daylight bombing, hitting targets from low altitude, between 370 and 915 metres. The squadron had conducted similar bombing missions in Malaya but refined its accuracy in Vietnam to such an extent it consistently out-performed all other units of the 35th Tactical Fighter Wing.

This high proficiency was not limited to just aircrew, but applied to the ground crew as well. The maintenance staff worked 24 hours a day on a two-shift roster, achieving the noteworthy rate of 97 per cent serviceability.

The squadron hit targets from the demilitarised zone in the north, the border between North and South Vietnam, and the Mekong Delta in the south. This included enemy concentrations around Hue, the siege of Khe Sanh in 1968, and the South Vietnamese attack into Laos in 1971. In total, the squadron flew over 11 900 combat missions. It also lost only two aircraft during the conflict: one disappearing on a night bombing mission in 1970, with its crew were listed as “missing in action”, while the other shot down by a surface-to-air missile near the demilitarised zone in 1971.

After four years and two months in Vietnam 2 Squadron returned to Australia in June 1971, the first RAAF squadron to do so. Upon its return 2 Squadron was awarded two foreign unit citations: the Cross of Gallantry with Palm, from the Republic of Vietnam; and a United States Air Force Outstanding Unit Award.

Glossary

- [Communist Terrorists](#)
- [Far East Strategic Reserve](#)
- [Butterworth](#)

Equipment

- [Canberra bomber](#)

Battle Honours

- nil

Casualties

- 5 died

For more information please see the [Roll of Honour](#) and [Vietnam War Nominal Roll](#) (external website) databases.

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Commanding Officers

- [Aronsen, Rolf Basil](#)
- [Evans, Selwyn David](#)
- [Whitehead, John Alan](#)
- [Boast, Jack Robert](#)
- [Downing, Francis John Leonard](#)
- [Thorpe, Thomas Hugh](#)

Decorations

- 3 DSO
- 2 MBE
- 7 DFC
- 1 DSFC and bar
- 1 MM
- 1 BEM
- 35 MID
- 3 foreign awards

For more information please see [Honours and Awards](#) database

References

- [Coulthard-Clark, Christopher D, *Official History, Vietnam Vol.IV: The RAAF in Vietnam : Australian air involvement in the Vietnam war 1962-1975*, \(St Leonards, N.S.W. : Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, 1995\)](#)
- [Stephens, Alan, *The Australian centenary history of defence Vol. 2, The Royal Australian Air Force*, \(Melbourne : Oxford University Press, 2001\)](#)

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