

The Loss of Albatross 03 – Bell UH-1H Iroquois A2-769 - 26 October 1969

By: Roger Lambert, Platoon Commander, 9 Platoon, C Company, 1969/70

One of my 9 Platoon diggers, PTE Terry “Fitzzy” Fitzgerald, recently sent me a copy of a photograph he had taken of a destroyed Iroquois helicopter. The tail fin of the aircraft was still intact and the RAAF red, white and blue fin flash and serial number, A2-769, were clearly visible. The memories came flooding back to that time some 50 years ago that we came across the wreckage while patrolling during an operation in the last quarter of 1969.



Remains of Bell UH-1H Iroquois A2-769 (Image by Terry Fitzgerald)

By way of background, at the time of A2-769's loss, we (5 RAR) were conducting Operation 'Kings Cross' (October to November 1969) in an area known to the VC as the Hat Dich Secret Zone. This was an area that had been an enemy haven since the days of the Viet Minh war. It was an important logistic support area for the enemy as it was situated between Route 15 (Saigon to Vung Tau), Route 2 (Baria to Xuyen Moc and Route 1 (of 'Street Without Joy' fame.

These roads were vital to the VC as it was along these routes that their supplies were transported to the villages of Thai Tien, Tham Tien, Phuoc My and tham Phous on Route 15 and Binh Ba, Ngai Giao and Xa Bang on Route 2.

Terry's image got me thinking about what caused the loss of the Iroquois and what was the fate of the crew.

A little delving on the Internet soon produced the information that I was looking for, not only in relation to the loss of the helicopter but also the fate of the aircrew.

Somewhat eerily, in almost a foreboding of what was to come, A2-769 was involved in a forced landing in October 1968. The engine failure was the cause of the forced landing six kilometres West of Ap Suoi Nghe.



This Australian War Memorial image, taken October 1968, shows the purple smoke thrown by the aircrew of A2-769 to indicate to the recovery aircraft, a Boeing-Vertol CH-47 Chinook of the United States Army, that the downed aircraft was still in allied hands.

The 1st Australian Task Force (1ATF) base at Nui Dat can be seen, to the south east, in the background of the photograph.

The US Army Chinook successfully transported the stricken Iroquois as a slung load back to Vung Tau where 9 Squadron were based. The Iroquois was initially assessed as having sustained Category 4 damage. In layman's terms, that assessment was that the Iroquois was a write-off.

However, following negotiations that commenced on 5 December 1968, rather than being written off as a result of that initial assessment, A2-769 was given a reprieve. Following approval from Australia, the airframe was passed to the local US Army aircraft maintenance facility at Vung Tau. Here, the airframe underwent repairs to bring it back to airworthiness.

These repairs were subsequently successfully undertaken and the helicopter was returned to 9 Squadron on 20 January 1969 to continue its operational career in theatre.



This AWM image shows A2-769 at Vung Tau undergoing inspection following its recovery to the 9 Squadron maintenance area.

One only needs to look at the skids of the helicopter to gain an understanding of the force of what must have been quite a heavy landing. Those airmen in the vicinity are probably air frame fitters noting the repairs that would be required to make the Iroquois airworthy again.

Fast forward to 26 October 1969 and A2-769 was again forced to make an emergency landing. However, this time the cause was the result of enemy fire.

As may be seen from the following extract, the helicopter was flying in support of 9 RAR. A2-769, operating with the Callsign "Albatross 03", flew some twenty-six sorties on 26 October 1969. The Iroquois had the usual crew of two pilots and two crewmen acting as door gunners.

But who were the crew and what was their fate? The National Archives of Australia (NAA) provided the names of the aircrew which were recorded in the 9 Squadron Operations Log. The crew comprised of Woolf, Knights, Parker and Price. So, at this stage, I had names but not what caused the loss of the helicopter nor the fate of these men. Further delving into the NAA records finally provided the answers I was seeking some 50 years after the event.

SECRET										
DETAILS OF OPERATIONS										
MONTH <u>OCTOBER</u> UNIT <u>NO 9 SQUADRON</u> SHEET NO. <u>21</u>										
DATE	AIRCRAFT NO	CREW	SORTIES	TIME	RDS FIRED	AREA OF OPERATION AND TYPE OF OPERATION	PAX	MED	FREIGHT (lbs)	
24	A2-378	WOOLF, PETTYT, MAY, PANNOWITZ	10	3.05		NUI DAT ADM	22			
	770	ROBINSON, SATRAPA, HENDY, HOWELL	12	3.45		FE, VR, LS	44		1050	
25	383	THOMPSON, ROBERTSON, MOLES, WALTERS	5	2.35		GUN				
	773	DRIVER, LEA, SHEEHAN, SHIPP	6	2.35		GUN	2			
26	383	HAZELWOOD, TRELOAR, MAY, SHIPP	5	3.40		GUN				
	376	ANDREWS, PETERSON, SCOBLE, HOWELL	6	1.10		ADM	18			
	767	ROBINSON, BEATTY, SHEEHAN, GABLE	2	.30		ADM	3			
	769	SATRAPA, MAIN, MOLES, GIBSON	23	3.55		LS, FE	53		11600	
	770	KNIGHT, ELLIS, BURTONSHAW, WALLER	24	5.15		ADM, FE, MED, LS,	44		1000	
	379	WALKER, BACH, PINKERTON, CARRIER	22	4.20		LS, FE	48			
	773	BROWN, THOMPSON, SMITH, REALE	5	3.40		GUN				
	769	WOOLF, KNIGHTS, PARKER, PRICE	26	4.30		LS				
	767	PETERSON, LYNCH, HENDY, GIBSON	16	4.35		MED, TP, ADM	55	2		
	379	BACH, HOBSON, MAXWELL, MAHONY	26	4.30		TP, LS, SPEC	47		8900	
26	770	BUDD, ANDREWS, ROBINSON, GABLE	14	3.15		LS, TP,	25		5600	
	771	KNIGHT, BEATTY, MOLES, McIVER	6	2.30		TRG, VR	17			

Extract from the 9 Squadron RAAF Operations Log for 26 October 1968 (NAA).

The Unit History Sheet for 9 Squadron not only revealed the ranks of the aircrew but also their responsibilities aboard "Albatross 03".

Pilot: Flight Lieutenant M.K. Woolf – Aircraft Captain

Co-Pilot: Flying Officer D.V. Knights

Crewman: Sergeant Parker F.J. Parker

Gunner: Aircraftsman A.J. Price

The following extract from the Unit History Sheet succinctly records what happened that fateful day on 26 October 1969. Although not recorded as such, A2-769 was very obviously hit by enemy ground fire and crash landed as a result.

What was pleasing to read was that the aircrew were successfully winched out of the crash site and taken to Vampire Pad at 2 Field Hospital, Vung Tau. Although injured to varying degrees, I finally had my answer as to their fate.

I also learnt that what we came across during our patrol were the remains of the helicopter after it had been assessed as Category 5 by the 9 Squadron Engineering Officer and destroyed in situ by explosives. Apparently, the demolition team came from our SASR and it was Standing Operational Procedure to destroy any aircraft assessed as Category 5 so that nothing useful could fall into enemy hands.

UNIT HISTORY SHEET
(AFO 18/F/5)

Form A. 50
(Revised May, 1951)

of (Unit or Formation) NO 9 SQUADRON

No. of Sheet..... 3 / 6

Place	Date	Summary of Events	References to Appendices
VUNG TAU	22 OCT	Two dust offs today, Alb 03, Flg Off C.R. Ellis (0314909) GDPLT lifted 1 ARVN malaria case from YS 242897 to Van Kiep barracks for attention and Alb 02, Wg Cdr R.W. Hibben (037568) GDPLT dusted off 1 Aust NIA with gunshot wounds from YS246737 to Vampire.	
	23 OCT	A 9 RAR move of B Coy from YS382729 to YS668588.	
	25 OCT	In two separate incidents Australians were killed by mines today, Alb 01, Flt Lt L.D. Knight (037573) GDPLT lifted out both bodies from YS508549.	
	26 OCT	Bushrangers covered a US dust off aircraft DO58 who was called forward by C/S 12 of 9 RAR. The American aircraft received groundfire and returned to base. A second US dust off, DO56, arrived at the same time as Alb 03 and DO56 was directed into a secure winch point. Whilst Alb 03 was holding high as a spare. BR72, Flt Off J.H. Driver (045529) GDPLT was flying top cover and BR 71, Flt Off B.A. Brown (045400) GDPLT went down and circled the winching aircraft DO56. Almost at the completion of the winch ground fire hit BR 71 and a strong smell of fuel and a crewman report of fire persuaded Flt Off Brown to leave the area and head for the nearest clearing. The aircraft flew normally however and another call from the crewman to say the smoke was streaming fuel made Flt Off Brown change his mind about landing in the bush and he continued about another three clicks and landed safely at FSB Diggers Rest. The American aircraft completed his winch in the meantime and Alb 03, Flt Lt M.K. Woolf (055160) GDPLT went in to do a lift out of 1 Aust KIA from the same winch point, BR 72 came to support Alb 03 if required. Alb 03 had just come to the hover when tracer was directed at Alb 03 and BR 72. BR 72 turned to roll in on the fire position and Alb 03 disappeared, no radio calls were heard. Dragon 33, a US Army Cobra, and Alb 04 eventually found Alb 03 as the light was falling. Crew of Alb 03 was winched out and taken to Vampire where the injuries to the crew were found to be as follows. Flt Lt M.K. Woolf (055160) GDPLT, captain of aircraft, broken bone in right thumb, cuts and contusions to legs and face; Flt Off D.V. Knights (031786) GDPLT Co-pilot, broken jaw. A18779 Sgt Parker F.J. O'KIA (Crewman) cuts to face, and A223690 AG Price R.J. ADG1 (Gunner) crushed 1st lumbar vertebrae. The aircraft was examined the next day by the Engineering Officer, pronounced Cat 5 and destroyed in situ by explosive charges.	
	27 OCT	ND01 Flt Lt J.F. Hazelwood (0219888) GDPLT dusted off 1 Aust KIA from YS265846. Soldier was flown from 9 RAR and had been killed on the previous afternoon.	
	28 OCT	Today C Coy of 6 RAR were moved from YS572691 to YS617882 and an ARVN patrol lifted to Nui Dat from YS373705. A fatal casualty in D Coy 9 RAR today. A soldier was carrying a claymore mine into position on the Company perimeter when he was struck by lightning and blown up. The body was lifted out by Flt Off J.M. Main (057697) GDPLT, Alb 04, and taken to Vampire.	

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Extract from the 9 Squadron Unit History Sheet of 26 October 1969 (NAA)

After some 50 years, it was very pleasing to learn that the crew of A2-769 were safely winched out after the helicopter was brought down and that the aircrew, although injured to varying degrees, survived the incident.

However, there is a sad corollary to the story of the loss of A2-769 involving one of the crew. Tragically, Derek Knights would lose his life in the crash of Bell UH-1B Iroquois A2-1023 near RAAF Williamtown, NSW on 19 August 1981.

A2-1023 was on a test flight because several days earlier it had pitched violently forward during a normal sortie. Many eyewitnesses observed the aircraft approaching the airfield in straight and level flight at 1500 feet altitude when, without warning, it broke up in the air. Both the main rotor and tail rotor were observed to separate from the aircraft and the consensus among eyewitness opinions was that tail rotor separation preceded main rotor separation. The main body of the aircraft fell inverted into a swamp which effectively prevented any outbreak of fire. There were no survivors from the three crew aboard.



Bell UH-1B Iroquois A2-1023 (RAAF Image)

The cause of the crash was attributed to tail rotor drive failure. One of the tail rotor pitch control cables fouled the tail rotor drive shaft. This caused the failure of the tail rotor drive then the main rotor blades separated.

Those killed were:

Pilot: Squadron Leader Derek John Knights

Co- Pilot: Flight Lieutenant Adrian Bryant

Observer: Sergeant Brian Wilson.

This article is dedicated to all the 9 Squadron air and ground crew that supported us so well during our tour of duty in 1969/70.