

## **A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF OUR NATIONAL PATRON REAR ADMIRAL NEIL RALPH RAN RET'D**

Neil Ralph was born in Melbourne in 1932 and was one of a family of 8 children. They finally moved to Ararat Victoria shortly afterward, where he spent most of his childhood catching rabbits, playing tennis and being a Boy Scout. His father was an ANZAC and veteran of the Western Front, one brother was a POW on the Burma Railway and another was in the RAAF during WW2. After completing High School he joined the Bank of NSW but developed a yearning for life in Naval Aviation. In 1952 he trained as aircrew in the recently formed Fleet Air Arm of the RAN, firstly as a navigator, then as a pilot. He was a member of the first FAA jet squadron, which trained in the UK and travelled back to Australia in the then new aircraft carrier HMAS MELBOURNE in 1956. Service in FAA squadrons both ashore and in the carrier followed for several years before he was transferred to helicopter training in 1961, then followed further squadron postings. (*Editor's note: FAA = Fleet Air Arm*)

In 1967 he was instructed to form up a new helicopter unit to be known as the RAN Helicopter Flight Vietnam, its purpose was to train in airmobile operations and then support the infantry in Vietnam. With much help from the Australian Army, the RAAF and from the US Army, this new unit of eight pilots, 4 navigators and about 40 aircraft maintenance personnel joined the US Army's 135th Assault Helicopter Company in Vung Tau to become an integrated unit. An intense year of combat operations followed, with the 135th operating in all areas of 3 and 4 Corps, sometimes supporting the ATF, sometimes the ARVN but mostly US Army units in the Delta.

This unique integrated arrangement carried on with different personnel year for a further 3 years and was very beneficial to both Services.

Service for two years as the Executive Officer in HMAS SYDNEY on the runs to and from Vietnam followed, then a 2 year spell in the UK on the staff of RN Staff College, which was a great experience. A flying appointment at NAS Nowra was next, then promotion to Captain and time as the Director of Naval Training and Captain of the destroyer HMAS TORRENS followed. In 1978 he became the first Director of the new RAN Staff College before attending the Royal College of Defence Studies in London in 1981. After a posting as Chief of Staff to the RAN Fleet Commander for 2 years it was back to Naval Air Station Nowra as CO of the Base in 1984, right at the time when the Navy's fixed wing aircraft were being withdrawn from service.

Promoted to Rear Admiral in 1985, Neil Ralph was posted as Deputy Chief of the Navy where he served for four years before retiring in 1989

Life in the Navy was followed by appointment as Repatriation Commissioner in 1989. He remained in the Commission for 6 years and among other things initiated action with John Printz and Professor Philip Morris to establish the National Centre for PTSD at RGH Heidelberg. He also initiated the trial for the Commission's rehabilitation program for veterans.

Retiring to life on a farm in the Nowra area in 1995, Neil Ralph maintains an interest in the RAN Naval Aviation Museum, in matters ex-service especially as the President of the Fleet Air Arm Association and proud Patron of the VVAA and also in agriculture.

Throughout most of his naval career and since, he has always been fully supported by his, wife Judy and his four children.

**All the above was written by Neil Ralph.**

**The following additions are by the Editor:**

Neil Ralph was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross (DSC) whilst serving in South Vietnam for "exceptional devotion to duty and repeated acts of bravery" (Source: "Gallant aid Distinguished Service Vietnam 1962 - 1973" by I. L. Barnes.)

He then became a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 1985 for "services in establishing the Royal Australian Navy Staff College". (Source: "Who's Who")

Whilst serving as Deputy Chief of Naval Staff he became an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO). This award, according to Neil, came with the job.

There have only ever been two naval air crew to reach Flag Rank (Admiral) and Neil is one, he is also the **ONLY** one who entered the Navy through Naval Aircrew entry to obtain Flag Rank.