

The role and operations of No. 2 Squadron, RAAF, in South Vietnam.

The role of No. 2 Squadron in South Vietnam, from April 1967 to June 1971, hardly changed from its creation 50 years earlier during the First World War (flying DH-5s and SE-5As), through service in the Second World War (with Avro Anson, Lockheed Hudson and Douglas B-25 bombers) and flying against Communist forces from Butterworth, Malaysia in the 1950s (Canberra jet bombers).

The squadron's strength was in serving allied troops on the ground in an exemplary manner, albeit occasionally suffering casualties through a determined perseverance to get to the target in the face of intensive enemy fire. The by-then vintage Canberra jet bomber proved its value in Vietnam, equipped with a rudimentary bombing system featuring a World War 2 era visual bomb-sight, overseen by a navigator who moved from the relative safety of his ejection seat to crawl forward and peer through cross-hairs at the moving target underneath.

Using an ageing Green Satin (RAF code name) doppler-effect based radar which gave accurate ground speed and drift angle measurements, enabling the crew to release accurately their load of 6 or 8 x 500lb, 750lb or 1,000lb bombs from both bomb-bay and wing-tip mountings, the squadron also recorded its efforts with F-24 or F-52 cameras, fitted inside the Canberra's bomb-bay, that photographically captured each bombing mission for rigorous assessment by the Bombing Leader on return from each mission to Phan Rang air base.

Known by their radio call-sign as the Magpies, the two-man crews undertook Close Air Support missions under the direction of an airborne Forward Air Controller (FAC), flying down to 1,000 feet (300 meters) above ground targets, often attracting enemy small weapons fire, to release their weapons. Sometimes the squadron incurred self-damage, i.e. being hit by fragments of their own bombs dropped, as occurred with Pilot Officer Max McGregor in Canberra A84-228 on 12 June 1968, perhaps pressing in a little too close, intent on assisting friendly troops under dire threat.



Or, flying at higher level, typically 15,000' to 20,000' altitude, under ground-based radar control (Combat Sky Spot missions), they risked being struck by Russian-made mobile-launched SA-2 surface-to-air missiles, as happened with Commanding Officer Wing Commander John Downing and Flight Lieutenant Alan Pinches again in Canberra A84-228 on 14 March 1971. This time, however, the same aircraft was lost as the crew ejected, fortunately to be safely rescued on the ground.

With accurate flying and precision bombing, the crews of No. 2 Squadron were renowned for their bombing prowess, with 50% of all bombs dropped within 50 metres of the target and 90% within 110 metres. Such precision couldn't have been achieved without the excellent round-the-clock work of No. 2 Squadron's ground crews, who

constantly fine-tuned all of the Canberra's ageing systems under hot tropical conditions typical of South Vietnam.

The reliability of the Australian-made Rolls Royce Avon engines powering the Mk 20 Canberra bomber also contributed to the unit's overall high standard of performance.

By the time No. 2 Squadron returned home to Australia in June 1971, after a prolonged absence overseas of 13 years altogether, its Canberra aircrews had dropped a total of 76,389 bombs during the four years' war in South Vietnam.

No 2 Squadron, RAAF, had truly earned its Outstanding Unit Award from the United States Air Force for this service.