

Chapter 16 – Aviation Detachment

The 5th Aviation Regiment was first deployed to East Timor as a part of Operation WARDEN and the Regiment's Black Hawks were one of the first Australian assets to enter the war-torn city of Dili in September 1999. At that stage there were 12 Black Hawks and up to 100 personnel operating out of the Dili heliport. The Squadron detachment of Black Hawks supplied an outstanding service with eight to nine aircraft operating at any given time. The tasks carried out were many and varied, but the initial work was the insertion of 2RAR soldiers around the area to stabilise the region. These Black Hawks were essential in a number of airmobile operations around the East Timor area that successfully suppressed the militia elements located all over the island. During Operation WARDEN the Regiment also sustained an AeroMedical Evacuation (AME) and Immediate Response Force (IRF) capability on short notice to move, for many days. When the INTERFET campaign (Operation WARDEN) was completed and the United Nations (UN) took control of the situation in East Timor the Black Hawks were no longer deemed to be required and were sent back to Australia. Overall, the Regiment's detachment was commended for its performance during Operation WARDEN and thought, at the time, that its work in East Timor was over.

The change in control of East Timor from International Force in East Timor (INTERFET) to the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) marked the beginning of Operation TANAGER. During this stage it was assumed that the UN helicopters would meet any requirement for support, including AME in the region. This was soon discovered to not be the case and after four months the 5th Aviation Regiment were recalled and told they would once again be required to redeploy to East Timor. During this upcoming operation it was decided that the requirement for Black Hawk support would be less than that of Operation WARDEN and would consist of only four Black Hawks and the associated personnel, all of which would be based at Balibo.

The 5th Aviation Regiment first made its home at Balibo in August 2000 and took the hill overlooking the town and Portuguese fort as its home. Initially the engineers were hard at work preparing the compound and they carried out a fantastic job. They started off by levelling the hill, an enormous job in itself, to create room for the four helicopter pads and the living area leaving what appeared to be a white rock moonscape. Using a special type of matting they managed to eliminate the problem of dust when the helicopters landed. After being 'on the hill' for over a year the area has become quite livable. The centre of the area is dominated by a tent city where the fifty-odd members of the detachment make their home. They have really made it an enjoyable place to live and they share this area with visiting maintenance personnel and the attached defence element. The detachment's position in Balibo is located on the edge of the compound. Due to this it has an infantry element that is co-located with the detachment and controls the security of the area. Because the detachment provides a 24-hour a day service, it was found to be impossible for the aircrew on night duty to sleep during the day, so ATCO huts were obtained to provide rest areas. The main living area is known as the Pegasus Club Annex, after the 5th Aviation Regiment social club back in Townsville. This area includes the dining hall, operations cell, kitchenette and maintenance section. All told it is a great place to be and with the help of the engineers, as well as the attached defence personnel, it has become a real home away from home.

As previously stated, the scope of the detachment's role was greatly reduced since its return to East Timor as a part of Operation TANAGER in comparison to INTERFET, where it was required to

carry out many and varied tasks from the Dili heliport. In Balibo it is required to provide 24 hour a day AME support to Australian Battalion Group (AUSBATT). The reason that it has been tasked with this role is that the Black Hawk is ideally suited to operate at high all up weights at altitude. Additionally, the detachment has the ability to operate throughout the night with the aid of night vision goggles. It is comforting for the soldiers out in the field to know that if they are injured throughout the day or night, there will be a doctor in location before long. The response time that the detachment provides is better than most places in Australia, and if the patient's injuries necessitate, they can be taken to the main hospital located in Dili. Even though the detachment provides an AME service to all of Sector West, the non-Australian forces in the New Zealand Battalion (NZBATT) receive support from 3 Squadron, Royal New Zealand Air Force, flying Iroquois helicopters during the daylight hours. These Kiwi 'Huey drivers' however do not operate using Night Vision Goggles in East Timor and as such do not operate at night. Due to this there is only a requirement to support NZBATT at night and the result is that the vast majority of the detachment's work is in the AUSBATT region under the umbrella of 4RAR.

As well as providing AME the detachment also provides, to the Commanding Officer of 4RAR, a method of inserting the Immediate and Quick Response Forces (IRF/QRF's). Predominantly, the area in the AUSBATT region is made up of mountainous terrain with a lot of thick scrub. Roads are of a poor standard making it extremely difficult to move around the AO utilising conventional transport. If militia forces are sighted in the AUSBATT, without helicopter support, getting to them could take an extended period, making policing the region extremely difficult. With the use of Black Hawk helicopters at the Commanding Officer's disposal, the preservation of the security of the AUSBATT can be maintained and response times to incidents can be greatly reduced. The Black Hawks provide an excellent service to 4RAR by greatly increasing the Battalion Group's combat power, but it is still limited in the service that it provides. Due to imposed operating restrictions, and the fact that there is only one troop's worth of helicopters deployed, tasking is limited to AME and IRF support.

Compared to most other units the make up of the 5th Aviation Regiment Black Hawk detachment is unusual in that it requires many different corps and trades to operate. To run the detachment there is an operations cell which ensures that the radios are manned, vehicles (non-flying) are maintained and serviceable, all message traffic from AUSBATT HQ is received and that all of the required tasks are carried out. There is also an administrative cell which runs the Q store, pay, and carry out all other associated administrative tasks while the detachment's aircrew party make up the pilots and loadmasters. The crews ensure the aircraft are available at any time to go on a task handed down from the CO. If the urgency of the situation requires, multiple crews can be activated and, depending upon serviceability, have all aircraft in the air at once. To ensure that this is possible there are Royal Australian and Electrical and Mechanical Engineer (RAEME) personnel who work on the aircraft around the clock to ensure that the required aircraft are ready for tasking. Even though all of these personnel come from the 5th Aviation Regiment they are from many varied sections and corps and are not used to working so closely with each other. It is a credit to them, and the Regiment, that they have done this so professionally and commendably.

One of the most important sections of the detachment is the AME team, as it is one of the main reasons that the detachment is here. The AME team itself is comprised of a Medical Officer, a Nursing Officer and medics. These personnel come from the 5th Aviation Regiment Regimental Aid Post (RAP) and other units within Australia. The positions are open from three to six month rotations, dependant on the individual availability. The members of the AME team are from diverse backgrounds and their replacements are staggered for continuity. All the members have had significant experience with AME prior to their deployment and previous experience of the team includes operations in both East Timor and Bougainville. The members of the team also have civilian AME experience and between them have operated on a variety of aircraft including the Huey, SeaKing, S-76, Bell 412 as well as the S-70 Black Hawk. The first week that a member of the AME team arrives, refresher training is conducted regardless of their previous experience. Training includes both day and night hoisting,

stretcher extractions by hoist, patient loading and airframe revision. Since the commencement of operations the detachment's AME teams have been involved in over 65 AMEs including numerous live hoists by both day and night. The teams have evacuated injured people involved with vehicle accidents, dehydration, spinal injuries and of course snake bites, scorpion and bee stings. All told the AME team has, and continues to provide, an excellent service that will continue to present the soldiers in the field with a feeling of reassurance that, should things go amiss, there are highly skilled personnel who can be there fast to render assistance.

The Regimental detachment to East Timor has been an outstanding experience for all involved and all of its members can feel proud of being a part of a job well done. The service that it has provided during 4RARs tour of East Timor has been praised by senior members of the Australian Defence Force both within East Timor and back in Australia. The 5th Aviation Regiment will continue to serve in East Timor after 4RAR has returned home and, with hard work, will strive to maintain the high standards it has managed to establish during the previous 12 months, for future Battalions.



TOP LEFT: A frontal view of the Pegasus club annex

ABOVE: The AME crew carrying out a dual hoist.

LEFT: Rappelling training being carried out from a Black Hawk



The entire 5th Aviation Regiment detachment on one of the helicopter pads at Balibo (Rotation 4 / Rotation 5).





An example of one of the many areas of AUSBATT accessible only by Black Hawk helicopter.