

1ATF TASK FORCE AIR COMMANDER 'BAY' ADAMS LANDING ZONE AFIRE – 13Jan69

Group Captain John 'Bay' Adams, DFC, AFC was 1ATF Task Force Air Commander (TFAC) in Vietnam from 7Oct68 to 8Oct69. He had a parallel role as Officer Commanding RAAF Vung Tau.

Bay had a very colourful role as a fighter pilot in WW2 flying Tempest aircraft with No. 3 Squadron RAF. He features prominently in 'The Big Show' by French fighter ace Pierre Clostermann who claimed '*Bay was imperturbable and feared neither God nor the Devil*'.



Hawker Tempest Mk V

After the Normandy invasion, German fighter squadrons became more mobile to avoid airfields that were being subjected to allied higher level bombing. The Army complained bitterly that their supply convoys were being impeded by Luftwaffe interdiction. Consequently, late in April 1945, 8 Tempests attacked Schwerin Luftwaffe airfield. This is what they were up against.

'The Luftwaffe had provided at least one Abteilung (battalion) of flak for each airfield. These Abteilungen were attached to the fighter Wings and generally comprised 3 batteries of automatic flak: one 37mm (9 single guns) and two 20mm (24 barrels in double or quadruple mountings). They moved with the fighters on airfield changes and were always first deployed. These formidable anti-aircraft defences were manned by superbly trained crews equipped with gyroscopic sights and predictors helped by a network of experienced spotters positioned over a radius of 6 miles. Any low level attackers had a very slim chance of surviving the 250 or so shells per second thrown up by the 33 barrels of the flak battalion.'

Pierre Clostermann and Bay Adams were the only 2 survivors of the 8 aircraft that attacked Schwerin airfield. RAF Tactical HQ then decided to discontinue low level attacks on German airfields as the losses of aircraft and pilots were unacceptable.



FLTLT Adams with BCOF Japan 1949

Post-WW2, Bay transferred to the Permanent Air Force in Australia and served in fighter squadrons roles until the early 1960s. During British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF) operations, he baled out of a Mustang after a mid-air collision over the Sea of Japan. After 77SQN was redeployed for the war in Korea, he was awarded a DFC for ground attack actions flying Mustangs.

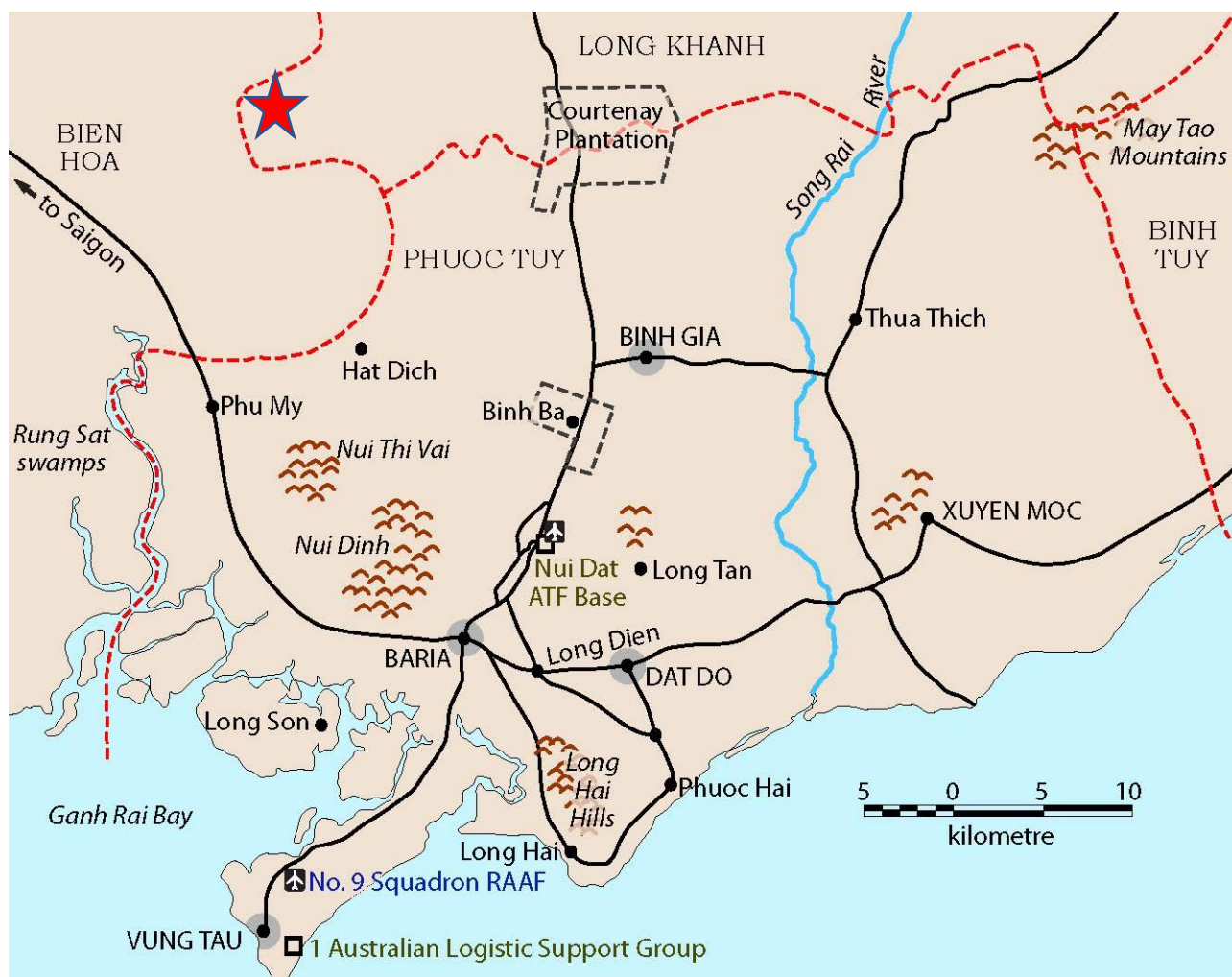


WGCDR Adams prior to promotion to GPCAPT in 1966

On 13Jan69, TFAC GPCAPT Bay Adams was my co-pilot for a trooping task recovering an infantry company from operations north of Nui Dat. Senior Officers who served in Vietnam were mostly given some minimal Iroquois training at 5SQN in Canberra before assuming duties and 9SQN was the only Air Force component under operational control of HQ 1 Australian Task Force.

We were leading a second flight of four Iroquois as Albatross Blue 1 and Bay was flying the aircraft beautifully in formation, as expected from a very experienced old fighter pilot.

It was a tight pick-up zone that was abandoned old ride paddy covered in dry season grass. There were some scattered old craters from artillery shelling and I was circumspect re landing surface soundness.



I said to Bay 'We will be pretty close to Red Section and just hold it lightly on the skids after touchdown.' We landed smoothly and then the aircraft tilted with some ground collapse and minor mast bumping. I grabbed control, repositioned as space would allow and then handed back control with the collective lowered just enough to keep ground contact and again said 'Just hold it lightly on the skids.'

Bay took control and then the aircraft reared up as ground collapsed beneath us and incredibly, the tail rotor did not hit the ground. He poled forward to level the aircraft which resulted in pretty severe mast bumping as the rotor hub stops contacted the mast. I grabbed control again and repositioned as proximity to other aircraft allowed.

When the Huey seemed stable, I closed the engine down and unstrapped from my seat so I could inspect the mast.

The Iroquois has a semi-rigid rotor hub allowing the rotating disc formed by 2 rotor blades to tilt a certain amount before some metal stops prevent further deviation. If the metal stops contact the mast during disc rotation, there is a juddering effect which could damage mast integrity depending on severity.



As I climbed atop the Huey, a sea of upturned green men faces were probably asking '*Is he mad?*' They were all pretty jumpy having had a few enemy contacts and keen to get out of the locality.

The mast was not marked or dented in any way although I would have erred on the side of caution and preferred to recover the aircraft by Chinook. However, there was an overriding consideration.

When the formation leader called for smoke to ID the PZ, a green man did the right thing and tossed a smoke grenade on to bare ground. But the canisters become white hot through chemical reaction and rotorwash from the first flight rolled the grenade into dry grass which triggered a potential inferno.

We could not leave 56 green men and a disabled aircraft amid a raging grassfire so flying our aircraft back to Nui Dat was a calculated risk.

As I climbed back into my seat, Bay said '*That was a very brave thing to do*' and I responded '*Not really, the bloody pad is on fire!*' His view of the grassfire was obstructed by other aircraft and he was probably wondering what he had done wrong.

We then flew the aircraft back to Nui Dat and my recollection is it was recovered to Vung Tau by Chinook as a precaution so the mast could be changed.



Over time, I realised that the happening was largely my fault. Bay had only limited Iroquois operating experience and I used jargon in saying: *'Just hold it lightly on the skids.'* I should have been more specific and said: *'Do not fully lower the collective'* which he would have understood.

Some years later when he had reached Air ranks, I bumped him a few times in Officers Mess bars and he would call me over saying: *'Do you remember that time we were flying together in Vietnam?'* I always responded: *'I remember.'*

During his TFAC tour, he would sometimes bring the Task Force Commander Brigadier 'Sandy' Pearson down to Vung Tau for a break. That Brigadier was well liked by most. They would usually be assailed by 'boggies' in the Officers Mess bar telling them how to run the war and they both seemed to enjoy the interaction.

Post-Vietnam War, he became Director Joint Operations and Plans in Canberra and as an Air Commodore was instrumental in directing tactical developments for Air Force helicopter squadrons.

Vale Air Vice Marshal 'Bay' Adams, CBE, DFC, AFC, a real air warrior and a very fine man.

