

IROQUOIS AIRCRAFT LIVERY

Iroquois ('Huey') helicopters operated by 9 Squadron RAAF in Vietnam were painted in a darkish drab green with predominantly black markings. That colour scheme was slightly modified after redeployment to Australia.



Prototype Bushranger A2-773 breaking left – Image: Air Force

In 1976, 9 Squadron was tasked to participate in development of techniques for surviving operations in more hostile air environments than those experienced during the Vietnam War. Need was identified for camouflage livery in development of fighter versus helicopter tactics and only two suitable matt colour aircraft paints were available in the supply system.



5 Squadron – Image: Air Force

A camouflage scheme utilizing those 2 colours was created by the young daughters of Wing Commander Brian Dirou, DFC then Commanding Officer of 9 Squadron.

That livery was introduced and adopted for the RAAF Iroquois fleet in 1977.



5 Squadron – Image: Air Force

Subsequently, both 5 and 9 Squadrons participated in further hostile air environment trials and exercises which proved the lightish green and tan camouflage scheme (without intermingled black) to be highly effective in Australian operating environs.



'Spot the Hueys' – Image: Air Force

After battlefield support helicopters had been transferred from the RAAF to Army Aviation in February 1989, the camouflage livery for Iroquois was retained and black aircraft ownership markings were simply changed from AIR FORCE to ARMY.

HOW THE IROQUOIS CAMOUFLAGE SCHEME ORIGINATED

Early 1976, when I became CO 9SQN, the Squadron was tasked with developing capabilities to:

- Operate utility helicopters in less permissive air environments than Vietnam.
- Support fast moving Army elements.
- Enhance night operations.

I believe these initiatives were originated by then Air Commodore 'Bay' Adams, CBE, DFC, AFC after he became Director of Air Force Plans in 1971 following a tour in Vietnam as Task Force Air Commander/OC RAAF Vung Tau.

We ascertained that there were only 2 drab aircraft paints in the RAAF supply system, both lightish colours of GREEN and TAN that would blend well with many landscape backgrounds in Australia.

I asked the unit pilot fraternity to devise suitable camouflage schemes utilizing the available colours but there seemed only lukewarm interest in the task. I was a bit exasperated so gathered up what design work had been achieved and took it home to our 5 daughters who set to work with their crayons and whatever.

Within a few days, No. 3 daughter came up to me saying, *'Here is your new colour scheme Dad'*. I then took her drawing to the 3 Aircraft Depot (3AD) Paint Shop at Amberley. The guys there made a couple of minor alterations to the draft design then said, *'That is workable.'*

We then submitted the proposed colour scheme to Headquarters Support Command (HQSC) in Melbourne who approved same saying we could paint just 4 aircraft. We protested that decision saying it would be difficult to maintain our aircraft maintenance stagger and conduct operational fighter versus helicopter trials. They relented slightly saying we could paint 5 aircraft.

After some brainstorming, we decided to progressively feed 5 aircraft through the 3AD Paint Shop and set up our own painting facility in the least obvious corner of the hangar that we shared with No. 12 Squadron. As we got airframes painted we would despatch them as necessary by C-130 to detachments to maintain our maintenance stagger. All this was carefully juggled to never have more than about 5 or so camouflaged birds observable at Amberley at any one time.

We were able to commit 2 camouflaged Iroquois to trials at Williamstown which was great fun. Some of us had flown fighters and knew how to make things difficult for Mirage and Macchi attackers.

If visual contact with a camouflaged Huey could be maintained, an attacking aircraft best option seemed to be spraying the chopper locality with cannon fire at longish range. Heat seeking missiles would likely be ineffective at low level. Deterrent return fire from mutually supporting helos in wide battle formations would of course complicate attacker options and the 2 colour camouflage scheme was quite effective.

Nearing end of year, detachments in faraway places returned to Amberley and with the 5 ship painting program at 3AD complete, we now had all unit aircraft camouflaged.

The Group Captain CO of No. 482 Maintenance Squadron was the defacto HQSC Representative on the base and when snooping around the airfield, he came across a flight line of camouflaged Iroquois. He stormed into my office uttering, *'What's the meaning of this, you were only supposed to paint 5 aircraft?'* I responded, *'Well, your mob at HQSC were making it difficult to maintain the maintenance stagger and achieve all of our tasking so we made an operational decision and painted the bloody lot!'*

A relatively short time later, we heard that the Air Force had decided on camouflage livery for the whole Hotel model Iroquois fleet.

The fighter versus helicopter trials revealed that low level operation of small helo groups dispersed in wide tactical formations could reduce risk in less permissive combat environs than the Vietnam War scenarios. Operating larger formations of helicopters to move Army companies/battalions is not a viable concept but squads (sections) of troops might be deployed by single aircraft with reasonable risk. Invaluable operational experience and knowledge was lost when the RAAF helicopter force was transferred to Army Aviation in 1989.

The Australian Army unwisely later added BLACK to the lightish GREEN and TAN for much of their hardware which arguably reduces the effectiveness of the 2 colour scheme.






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