



Brave EMU gets the bloody job done

In his new book, *Too Bold to Die*, IAN McPHEDRAN reveals the bravery of Tasmanian navy pilot Andy Perry during heavy contact missions in the Vietnam war. Perry was awarded the US Silver Star for his actions.

AUSTRALIAN Navy pilot Andy Perry was flying low and fast against a hail of enemy fire as he manoeuvred his Iroquois “Huey” helicopter into a hot jungle landing zone in South Vietnam on May 18, 1970, when he felt a bullet slam into his right boot.

Unsure whether he had been seriously wounded, Perry kept flying into the maelstrom to deposit a dozen or so South Vietnamese troops on the battlefield. The enemy fire was so intense that as the men piled out of the machine most of them were hit.

In the darkness, Perry had landed right in front of an enemy bunker during a combat assault mission with the US Army.

“They [the enemy] were dug in, they had trenches, they had bunkers, they had lots of automatic weapons and they had a big force,” he recalls.

“As I’m flying in, there are tracer coming up, and I could hear [pilot] Dave Farley telling me that he was taking 50 cal fire. So he just kept on climbing. I think he was at 5000 feet in the end to stay away from the 50s.

“Usually you are already in the flare before they open fire and sometimes they even wait

until the skids hit and you are most vulnerable, you are stopped, but I started taking fire at like 1000 feet. I was still miles away.

“It was all coming at me – the whole flight was yelling about taking fire from everywhere. “Anyway we went in, and we put it down and I put the machine down, but the biggest problem I had was that one of the pilots down the back turned his landing light on.

“They were air cavalry and they weren’t used to [combat assault] so they pulled out. ‘We’re not up for this, f..k off, we’re going home,’ and they did. That was after the first assault and, yeah, we took a lot of fire. I landed, there was a bunker in front of me, troops got off, most of them were hit, the machine was hit all over the place.”

As Perry bent down to check the damage to his foot, a burst of automatic fire crashed through the Plexiglas windscreen exactly where his head had just been.

“I thought I’d taken a round through my foot, but it was just where it struck the pedal and my foot is on the pedal. That sort of made me bend down and when I came up there were all these holes right across the windscreen, so I think that was

lucky.

“Nothing was damaged and I was still flying, so that’s all you care about.”

A 30-calibre round had hit the rudder pedal, creased his boot and lodged in his seat. The bullets that penetrated the windscreen missed all vital equipment and Perry and his crew made two more sorties into the zone that night.

Acting Sub-Lieutenant Perry, of the Royal Australian Navy, was seconded to the 135th Assault Helicopter Company of the US Army’s First Aviation Brigade, known as the EMUs, short for Experimental Military Unit. Their motto was “Get the bloody job done”.

And that usually meant flying hard and fast under fire into hot landing zones, dumping troops and getting out as fast as possible.

The EMUs were the only fully integrated multi-national helicopter company fighting in Vietnam.

More than 200 Australian navy pilots, plus observers and maintainers, were posted to the US unit on 12-month cycles between 1967 and 1971.

“For an adrenaline junkie, it is the ultimate, because every single time you are doing it, you are betting with the highest of stakes – your own life. And,

when you come off, when you come out of there and go ‘Phew!’ and you look at your mate, you’ve got this f...ing s..t-eating grin on your face. ‘Wow, far out, we are all alive, everybody OK? Yeah, we took a few rounds today, is anything dripping or anything like that?’ ‘No, no, we are good, sir.’ ‘OK, we’ll go back and do that again.’”

For his efforts on the night of May 18, Perry was recommended for the US military’s Silver Star.

This is the highest award given to non-Americans and the third highest award for bravery in combat behind the Medal of Honour (the American equivalent of the Victoria Cross) and the Distinguished Service Cross.

By contrast, the Australian Government presented him with a mention in despatches – the same award given to the postal clerk at Vung Tau for good service.

And, thanks to politics, quotas and bureaucratic incompetence it would be a quarter of a century before the Silver Star was pinned to Perry’s chest.

In mid-1970, a senior US officer arrived at the EMUs’ base in Vietnam for a medal presentation ceremony.



"The whole company stood down for the day and they were going to have an American medal ceremony," Perry recalls.

"A bunch of guys were going to get air medals, and purple hearts and everything. I don't know who the general was. It might have been the boss who flew in to shake everybody's hand."

But, during the Vietnam war, no Australian serviceman was permitted to accept and wear an individual military decoration from a foreign country.

When the American general was told he wouldn't be able to pin the Silver Star on the young Australian pilot, he called the whole thing off so there was no medal ceremony at all.

"He said, 'If we can't do the big one, we are not doing any of it,'" Perry recalls.

"He came over and we had our cucumber sandwiches with the rinds cut off and we stood around and he shook me by the hand and said, 'Bloody good job, son,' and 'P.s poor on your government's behalf. It's a bloody shame and one day we might get over it, and get it sorted, but right now I can't do anything. That's what the politicians have told me. It's come down from even higher than me.'"

Andy Perry was unhappy that his medal could not be presented, but the war went on and the next day it was back to flying and "getting the bloody job done".

That job included clandestine and highly illegal flights into neighbouring Cambodia, carrying a variety of American passengers, many of them dressed in civilian clothing.

The Government had ordered Australian personnel not to enter Cambodia or Laos, or even go within a certain distance of the border, under any circumstances. The Australian embassy in Saigon had reinforced the point just before the EMUs began operations into Cambodia, but Perry says he and other RAN pilots working with the 135th regularly flew across the frontier on secret missions for the US 5th

Special Forces or Navy SEALs who were infiltrating the southern end of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which ran from North Vietnam into Laos and Cambodia and then back into South Vietnam.

US forces ran an undeclared secret war in both countries in a bid to stem the flow of supplies along the trail.

"They even gave me the uniform, bits of which I've still got," Perry says.

"They were marines mostly, but they did all kinds of stuff. Their call sign was Cheap Tricks. We also worked with the SEALs, and the SEALs had the odd Australian with them as well.

"They did phoenix jobs and stuff like that, all single ship work, people dressed in civilian clothes, and they'd want to go somewhere. 'We'll tell you when we get there.'"

"The special forces boys would often request pilots by name and Perry was popular because he was willing to have a go at most things, regardless of what the Government said.

Fortunately, acting Sub-Lieutenant Perry, who celebrated his 21st birthday in Vietnam, survived the cross-border missions physically unscathed. So, after an eventful 10-month deployment, he was back at HMAS Albatross, at Nowra on the NSW south coast, trying his best to transfer out of the training base.

His US Silver Star citation sat in a safe at Defence Headquarters in Canberra for years through one of the most shameful periods in Australian political history, when Vietnam veterans were being vilified and treated as pariahs.

In January, 1985, the Defence Minister, Kim Beazley, responded to one of Perry's many representations through his local member of Parliament, Peter White, with a flat denial that the award had ever been given.

"Mr Perry's service records contain no evidence of a Silver Star being awarded to him," the Beazley letter said.

"Enquiries have revealed that it is now difficult, and in many cases impossible to validate claims by individual Australians for United States

awards which were made in the field. In these circumstances I regret that it is not possible to establish whether the Silver Star was awarded to Mr Perry."

By mid-June the following year, the American citation had been discovered in a separate honours and awards file. But the Minister for Sport, Recreation and Tourism, John Brown, in another letter to Peter White, stood firm about the Government's policy.

"Given that the traditional British awards were available to our servicemen, there is no justification for granting permission to formally accept and wear these foreign awards," his letter said.

Three Australians serving with the EMUs were made Members of the Order of the British Empire, eight received the Distinguished Service Cross, five the Distinguished Flying Cross, one the British Empire Medal and 25 were mentioned in despatches. This was more than half the honours awarded to navy personnel during the entire conflict.

Andy Perry left the navy in late 1971. The mental scars from the war remained but, after two attempts, he was able to conquer the self-medicating lure of the demon drink that had been with him right through his Vietnam tour.

"I was drinking too much before I went. I was certainly drinking too much when I came back," he says.

In between, there had been the company bar and an endless supply of cheap alcohol.

"There were mornings I'd get up and I'd have that much [several fingers of] Chivas Regal in like a Vegemite glass, before I'd go flying.

"We didn't talk about it, because you are not supposed to, but there was that much stuff that went on up there.

You talk about war crimes, you talk about all of this s.t that goes down, you know, you can see it every day, your whole day is a war crime. You know, the most amazing stuff going on right in front of your eyes and for a young bloke, I was 20 years old, I turned 21 up

there, I couldn't even vote for Christ's sake and I'm up there killing people."

Today, as he enjoys a very large cup of tea aboard his 16m converted Tasmanian timber fishing boat, Bill Bailey, in the beautiful Port Huon marina, about 60km south of Hobart, Perry says he doesn't regard what he did in Vietnam that night in 1970 as anything special.

"Every time we went in we'd take more rounds, have more holes punched in your machine. The thing is, you look at your instruments. As long as it is turning and burning it's good. That's all you worry about."

But he makes no secret of his pride in the professionalism of the EMUs. "If they wanted the best people for the job, the EMUs got the job because we could do more with less and we could fly faster, harder, whatever it took, because we were into it.

"You are there to do the mission, to 'get the bloody job done' and we were really imbued with that philosophy."

He says that he was just a 20-year-old kid from Tassie doing his job and having the time of his life.

In April, 1995, the medal injustice was finally corrected when Andy Perry received his Silver Star in Townsville. The commander of the US 7th Fleet, Vice-Admiral Archie Clemens, complete with an honour guard, pinned the medal to his chest aboard his flagship, the USS Blue Ridge, in Townsville Harbour.

Too Bold To Die By Ian McPhedran

Published: 1 September 2013

RRP: \$29.99, Format: Trade

paperback

ISBN: 9780732290238

Imprint: HarperCollins

Every single time you are doing it, you are betting with the highest of stakes – your own life



HONOURED: Andy Perry and his wife, Virginia, on Vietnam Veterans Day, 2011.



TASMANIAN HERO: Navy pilot and US Silver Star winner Andy Perry at the controls of his Iroquois “Huey” helicopter in Vietnam, and, inset, now enjoying the quiet life sailing at home in Tasmania.