

Phil Hodge – A14405 – Armament Fitter – (deceased 1976)

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Phil Hodge

I never met Phil, as he was always a posting ahead of me. I first heard about him from Al (Horrible) Hunt (and is he still alive?) I last heard of him about eight years ago after he retired to Tasmania but very sick. The way I heard it Phil was the armourer primarily responsible for the Iroquois gunship who worked with Brian (Guns) Daru (pilot).

Apparently he went all over Vietnam to bludge gear off the Yanks to put together the first D model gunship. Well he was back in Australia before I got to Vietnam (June 69) but the gunship became operational in March of 1969. Within my hearing everyone spoke well of him and his work. Now to move on a few years, I think around 74/75. Phil became ill, I think with cancer, and was hospitalised. Then came the sad part. He wanted to die in uniform and have a service funeral. But the Air Force wanted him discharged. The reason for this was that Phil was divorced (I think) and had a child or children that was the beneficiary of his estate. That estate would be larger if he was discharged and picked up his retirement benefits. His wish was over-ruled by the RAAF (for logical and good reasons) and he was discharged just before he died (and I am not sure if he even knew it, such was his condition).

Even though Phil had long left the helicopter world, it had not forgotten him. So 9 Squadron personnel decided that his final wish would be fulfilled as far as it could be. So with an official service funeral out of the question, it was decided to make it as close as possible to one and almost all the squadron personnel attended his funeral, in uniform. I did not attend as I had to prepare the gunships for a flypast. Yes it was decided (within the squadron) to have a flypast at the funeral, completely against the rules.

Well I armed two gunships with blanks and we launched them for the flypast. Now comes the funny/sad bit. The funeral was up in The Gap area of Brisbane and apparently there are a couple of cemeteries in close proximity in the valleys up there. Well Murphy's law took control and some unsuspecting people were having a quiet funeral as two gunships rolled in and opened up with mini guns firing blanks at 4000 rounds a minute.

A major shock for them and a disappointment for Phil's funeral. But it did not matter in the long run, as the squadron did its best, against all the rules and regs, to honour an armourer and a fellow chopper squadron member who worked very hard for both the squadron and the RAAF. Not a thing was ever mentioned officially about the squadron's actions on that day. But it will no doubt be remembered, as will Phil and the rest of the departed squadron members on 24 February in Tamworth when 9 Squadron holds its Vietnam reunion.

Peter Howe