

**O118325 Pilot Officer Ronald William Betts, No. 9 Squadron RAAF**  
**DOW 20 March 1971**

Today we remember and pay tribute to Pilot Officer Ronald William Betts.

Ronald Betts was born in Launceston, Tasmania on 1 March 1947 to “Mannie” and Jean Betts. Mannie had served with the Royal Australian Air Force in New Guinea during the Second World War and then worked for Tasmanian Railways. A part-time jazz musician, his trio regularly played in Launceston. Ron’s mother was energetic and sporty, and a strict Seventh Day Adventist. Ron also had an elder sister and two younger sisters.

In 1958 the family moved to Hobart. They settled in Moonah, where Ron attended the Seventh Day Adventist school. His schoolwork dropped away as other interests grew. He was good at a number of sports, particularly swimming, and he quickly became good on the piano. Known as “Pinky” to his family, Ron was a charming young man. But his real passion was flying.

Ron joined the Tasmanian Transport Department in 1963 as a junior clerk. He then attended Avondale College at Cooranbong in New South Wales, and obtained his leaving certificate by the end of 1965. Ron returned to Launceston where he and a school friend joined the local aero club and took flying lessons.

The following year Ron travelled to Papua and New Guinea with a friend whose uncle had lined up work for the pair. He became a clerk in the Department of Public Health in Port Moresby, and he continued flying. As his ambition was to join the air force and fly fighters, he applied to the RAAF in mid-1967. By January the following year he had been accepted.

After attending No. 1 Flying Training School at Point Cook, Ron was transferred to No. 2 Flight Training School in Western Australia, where he began training in Vampire fighters. He qualified as a pilot in June 1969 and was transferred to No. 35 Operational Conversion Unit at RAAF Williamstown, flying Sabres. By the end of 1969, having not attained the required standard, Ron was transferred to No. 5 Squadron at Fairbairn in the ACT to fly helicopters, namely the Bell UH-1 Iroquois or “Huey”.

Taking well to the helicopters, Ron soon qualified on the Huey and in late July 1970 he was posted to Vietnam with No. 9 Squadron. In a letter to his mother written shortly before he was posted to Vietnam he said:

“To tell you the truth I don’t particularly want to go at all ... My only reason for not wanting to go is moral. I don’t believe in war anyway ... I’m not a conscientious objector and as a professional I would go if asked but I wouldn’t try to justify it morally and patriotically as I don’t think there is any such justification ... Financially a tour of [Vietnam] and the operational experience would be the main attraction for me, if I have to go ...”

Ron arrived in South Vietnam on 22 July 1970 and was soon in action, seeing many hours of operational flying. Missions varied from reconnaissance to fire support, SAS insertion or medevac flights, known as “dust-offs”. In January 1971 he wrote that he was “enjoying Dust-off as it’s a very challenging job and I’m handling it OK ... I feel as though I’m doing something worthwhile. A small sane island in an ocean of insanity”.

The following month Ron was put on “Bushranger” operations, flying helicopter gunships that provided fire support for troops on the ground. Ron’s last letter home, written on 9 March 1971, noted, “The flying has picked up quite a bit over the last week or two on gunships... I’m going to be glad to get out of here for a breather and get home and see you all.”

On the afternoon of 20 March, elements of 8 Platoon, C Company, 3 RAR encountered a well-concealed enemy bunker system north-east of Xuyen Moc.

As they moved to engage it an intense firefight erupted and the Australians became pinned down. Their leader, 2nd Lieutenant David Paterson was mortally wounded and two others were hit.

9 Squadron was called to assist and two heavily armed gunships were despatched. Shortly after 2 o’clock Bushranger 71 and 72 arrived over the battlefield. Flight Lieutenant David Freedman piloted Bushranger 71; in the seat beside him was his co-pilot, Ron Betts.

The troops on the ground desperately needed a resupply of coloured smoke grenades so they could mark their positions. As Bushranger 71 came in low to make the drop it was engaged by an enemy heavy machine-gun, which peppered the aircraft. Ron was struck in the head. Freedman managed to pull away and fly the chopper to a nearby fire support base where Ron was quickly transferred to another helicopter which sped him to the US military hospital at Long Binh. But his wound proved mortal; Ron was dead on arrival, the first RAAF pilot killed in action in Vietnam.

Ron's father received a telegram from Wing Commander Peter Coy the next day and immediately drove from Devonport to Launceston to inform Ron's mother. Their son's body was returned to Launceston. A service took place at the Launceston Seventh-day Adventist Church, and Ron was laid to rest at Carr Villa Cemetery. He was 24 years old.

His name is listed on the Roll of Honour on my left, among the 521 Australians who died while serving in the Vietnam War.

This is but one of the many stories of service and sacrifice told here at the Australian War Memorial. We now remember Pilot Officer Ronald William Betts, who gave his life for us, for our freedoms, and in the hope of a better world.

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