

AUSTRALIAN GUNNER OBITUARY RESOURCE

Major George A Constable

24 March 1936 – 23 May 1968

By Dick Knight and John Macpherson



Major George Constable was killed in action in South Vietnam on 23 May 1968. He was shot down by enemy ground fire while flying visual reconnaissance over a 1st Australian Task Force (1ATF) convoy which was returning from the area of the battle of Coral-Balmoral. At the time George was the Officer Commanding (OC) 161 (Independent) Reconnaissance Flight (161 Recce Flt). His death saw the Australian Army lose one of its promising sons, a gunner pilot, and an inspiring leader.

Born in Kyogle, NSW on 24 March 1936 and educated in Casino, George attended the Royal Military College, Duntroon, graduating on 11 December 1957 into the Royal Australian Artillery (RAA). After young officer regimental training at the School of Artillery and a stint as a platoon commander in 17th National Service Training Battalion, Perth WA, he attended 16/59 Air OP Course in Canberra

and graduated on 17th July 1959. He remained in Canberra at the Air OP Flight as a staff pilot and was converted to the new Cessna 180 aircraft which was replacing the Auster Mk III.



This preceded a posting to the newly raised 16th Army Light Aircraft Squadron (16 ALAS) at RAAF Amberley (Qld) on 1 December 1960. He was a founding member of this unit, the first army aviation unit since the disbandment of the Australian Army Flying Corps after WWI, before the establishment of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF). He was one of twelve Air OP pilots to be employed in the establishment of 16 ALAS. George was an above average pilot and flew tasks in support of army units until August 1961 when he was posted back to the guns. He served in Malaysia with 102nd Field Battery which was commanded by then Major Brien Forward (an Air OP pilot trained on the 1/51 Course with Jo Luscombe). On George's return to Australia in the early 60s he assumed the posting of Adjutant of 3rd Field Regiment RAA Citizen Military Forces (CMF) in Perth. He

returned to flying in early 1966 when he was appointed second in command (2i/c) of the reconnaissance squadron 1st Army Aviation Regiment. He also fitted in a conversion course to helicopters and then assumed command of the squadron in anticipation of his next posting to South Vietnam.

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Major Constable took command of the 161 Recce Flt at Nui Dat, Phuoc Tuy Province, South Vietnam in July 1967. Prior to this, in 1965, 161 Recce Flt with four aircraft, two Cessna 180 and two Bell Sioux helicopters had joined the United States 173rd Airborne Brigade at Bien Hoa with other Australian units. Subsequently, when the 1ATF was established at Nui Dat in 1966, the Flight relocated to Vung Tau where it was reinforced with the addition of one more Cessna 180, four Sioux and an extra 60 personnel. The Flight was re-designated as 161 (Independent) Reconnaissance Flight and came under command of 1ATF as an 'arms' unit. Aircraft of the Flight flew in support of 1ATF operations in Phuoc Tuy Province from the Vung Tau airfield until the Flight was able to move to the newly completed airstrip and accommodation within the 1ATF perimeter in February/March 1967. By that time the monthly flying rate exceeded 1000 hours and the unit was an active participant in all 1ATF operations.

George was well prepared and ready, slipping easily and confidently into his new command. He led from the front, flying regularly on a day to day basis and ensuring that the Flight's support to Task Force units never slackened in either quantity or quality.

On 23 May 1968, George Constable was flying cover for an Australian road convey returning from operations in Bien Hoa Province - Area of Operations (AO) Surfers. Half or the Flight had been deployed forward, the remainder continuing normal operations from Nui Dat. George was flying a US Army Cessna 01 Bird Dog when he was shot down and killed by enemy ground fire within sight of the convoy. An eyewitness observed that the aircraft had been flying fast at about 100 metres above the ground to the south then climbing to about 300 metres before turning west. It then turned again to return to the road. During this time, gunfire was heard, and the aircraft turned back, nose down. No apparent attempt was made to pull out of the dive, and it struck the ground about 200 metres from the convoy. It burst into flames on impact. The witness believes the pilot was either mortally wounded or shot dead at the top of the dive. The convoy halted and personnel rushed to the crash site but could not get closer than 20 metres because of the flames.



George was accorded full military honours on 3 June 1968 and interred at Forestville Cemetery on Sydney's northern beaches. George was married and with his wife Annette had a three year old daughter Nicole. A second daughter Dianne was born two months into his tour of South Vietnam.