

# THE VIETNAM WAR

## AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE

[Compiled from records and historical articles by R Freshfield]

### Introduction

What is referred to as the Vietnam War began for the US in the early 1950s when it deployed military advisors to support South Vietnam forces. Australian advisors joined the war in 1962. South Korea, New Zealand, The Philippines, Taiwan and Thailand also sent troops.

The war ended for *Australian* forces on 11 January 1973, in a proclamation by Governor General *Sir Paul Hasluck*. 12 days before the *Paris Peace Accord* was signed, although it was another 2 years later in May 1975, that North Vietnam troops overran Saigon, (Now Ho Chi Minh City), and declared victory.

But this was only the most recent chapter of an era spanning many decades, indeed centuries, of conflict in the region now known as Vietnam.

This story begins during the Second World War when the Japanese invaded Vietnam, then a colony of France.

### 1. French Indochina – Vietnam

Prior to WW2, Vietnam was part of the colony of French Indochina that included Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Vietnam was divided into the 3 governances of Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina. (*See Map1*). In 1940, the Japanese military invaded Vietnam and took control from the *Vichy-French* government stationing some 30,000 troops securing ports and airfields. Vietnam became one of the main staging areas for Japanese military operations in South East Asia for the next five years.

During WW2 a movement for a national liberation of Vietnam from both the French and the Japanese developed in amongst Vietnamese exiles in southern China. In May 1941 *Ho Chi Minh* formed these exiles into the *Viet Minh*, a ‘united front’ for several nationalist groups. Utilising the teaching of Mao Zedong -Mao Tse Tung - in the art of guerrilla hit and run tactics, Minh’s group became highly skilled in harassing the Japanese invaders.

The Chinese and Americans began using this group for intelligence gathering, of Japanese movements, and to assist in the rescue of downed pilots, relying more and more on the *Viet Minh* as the war progressed.

In March 1945, with defeat looking ominous, the Japanese disarmed and interned the French, who had cooperated with Japans’ occupation forces. *Bao Dai*, the last (French) appointed Emperor of Vietnam, was permitted to proclaim Vietnam’s independence and appoint a national government at Hue. However, all real power remained with the Japanese Army of occupation.

Meanwhile, in 1943, the *Viet Minh* had organised itself into a network of political agents and groups of guerrilla fighters, making themselves useful to the allies still fighting Japan. China and the USA gave financial assistance, and training, and weapons through the operations of the OSS (*Office of Strategic Services – the forerunner of the CIA*).



With the fall of Japan in August 1945 the *Viet Minh* ordered a general uprising, taking power in Hanoi, northern Vietnam, that same month. *Bao Dai* abdicated as Emperor, after his Hue government resigned in favour of the Hanoi Government set up under *Ho Chi Minh*.

At the end of WW2, during the *Potsdam Conference*, (Set up by the Allies to settle land boundaries, and reparations, among other matters), France tried to regain control of her territories in Indochina. Under the arrangements it was left to the British to disarm the Japanese in the south of Vietnam, and China to disarm them in the north. China did not want the French returned to the region, and decided not to interfere with the established *Ho Chi Minh* Government in Hanoi.

The British on the other hand, not only rearmed the French that the Japanese had interned, but supported them to depose the southern Vietnam administration. In September 1945 the French began the re-conquest of Vietnam, driving both communists and non-communists into armed resistance. This became known as the *Indochina War*, and lasted from 1946 to 1954.

The French could only maintain stability in the major cities with it becoming increasingly more difficult to control other parts of the country. Neither side could gain the upper hand until, in 1954, the *Viet Minh* overran an important base in the north at what became known as the *Battle of Dien Bien Phu*. All French troops then withdrew to the southern half of Vietnam, and soon after the French Government in Paris announced that the *Geneva Convention*, set up beforehand, was ready to reach a treaty agreement between the two parties.

The result of that treaty saw Vietnam divided, at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel, into North and South Vietnam. (See Map2). The Hanoi government in the north was led by *Ho Chi Minh*, and a government acceptable to the French, was set up in the southern city of *Saigon*. The French Army remained in South Vietnam, training the new South Vietnam Army, fearing a possible resurgence of old Viet Minh units, still residents of the south, calling themselves the National Liberation Front of the Southern Region but often referred to as the *Viet Cong*.



*Ho Chi Minh & French leader  
Georges Bidault in 1946*



*The Geneva Convention 1954*



*(The French surrender at Dien Bien Phu)  
Pic. Courtesy Hanoi Library Ref10000497*

## 2. The ‘Advisory’ Teams

In 1956 the French had totally withdrawn from South East Asia, expecting that an election for a government of the whole of Vietnam agreed to at the Geneva Convention would take place. However, the South, led by *Ngo Dinh Diem*, did not allow the election to proceed, instead inviting the USA to provide assistance.

The task of training the South Vietnamese forces fell to a USA Advisory Team. In the early 1960’s it was reported that thousands of ‘Advisors’ were working in South Vietnam. It was at this time that western allies feared a communist takeover in the whole of the southern Asia region, putting forward the theory of the *Domino Effect*.

In August 1962, under the auspices of having the survival of the South Vietnam government as in Australia’s national interest, the Menzies Government sent a team of Australian Military Advisors. The team



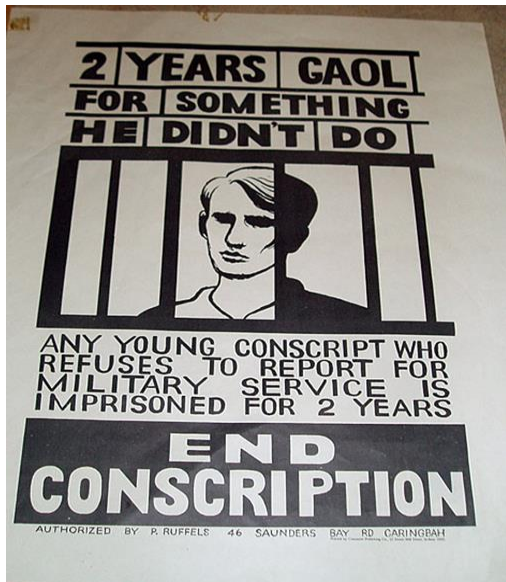
became known as the *AATTV* – Australian Army Training Team Vietnam- and by 1965 numbered some 100. Not only did this group train the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam, *ARVN*, but went on combat operations, with their *ARVN* counterparts, against the *Viet Cong* and, eventually, the *Peoples Army of Vietnam (PAVN)* often referred to as the *NVA* or *North Vietnamese Army*.

There were 4 Victoria Crosses awarded to Australians during the Vietnam War; all going to members of *AATTV*. *It was the most highly decorated unit in Australian military history.*

(PIC. – Australian Advisor with *ARVN* troops-Ctsy Australia at War- ABC TV)



### 3. Conscription



Conscription was introduced in Australia in November 1964, by the *Menzies Government*, to bolster the Australian Army troop numbers. All males were required to register for *National Service* as they turned 19 years of age. The accepted *modus operandi* was that numbered tiles, or marbles, representing birth dates were drawn, and all those whose 20<sup>th</sup> birthday matched the number drawn, were required to undergo physical and medical examinations, to ascertain acceptability for service in the Australian Army.

If a male passed the examinations they were ‘called-up’, or conscripted into National Service, for a 2 year term in the Army. there was no ‘call-up’ Services, for the Royal Australian Navy or the Royal Australian Air Force. Clearly, the government wanted to bolster the ground troops for commitment overseas.

Nearly 725,000 registered for National Service between 1965 and 1972. The total actually called up for service in the Army was

roughly 60,000, with a third of that number, almost 20,000 *Nashos*, serving in South Vietnam.

In 1971, when 4RAR/NZ – 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (With a New Zealand Company on Detachment)- commenced a tour of duty, roughly 45 percent of the Regiment’s battalions were National Servicemen.



### 4. Australia commits troops

The *Viet Cong* were seriously threatening the South Vietnam Governments security by 1965, and the USA began committing military units. The PAVN, often referred to as the *The North Vietnam Army* or NVA retaliated by bolstering its support of the *Viet Cong*, inserting troops in the north of South Vietnam, and supplying weapons and instructors to *Viet Cong* enclaves further south.

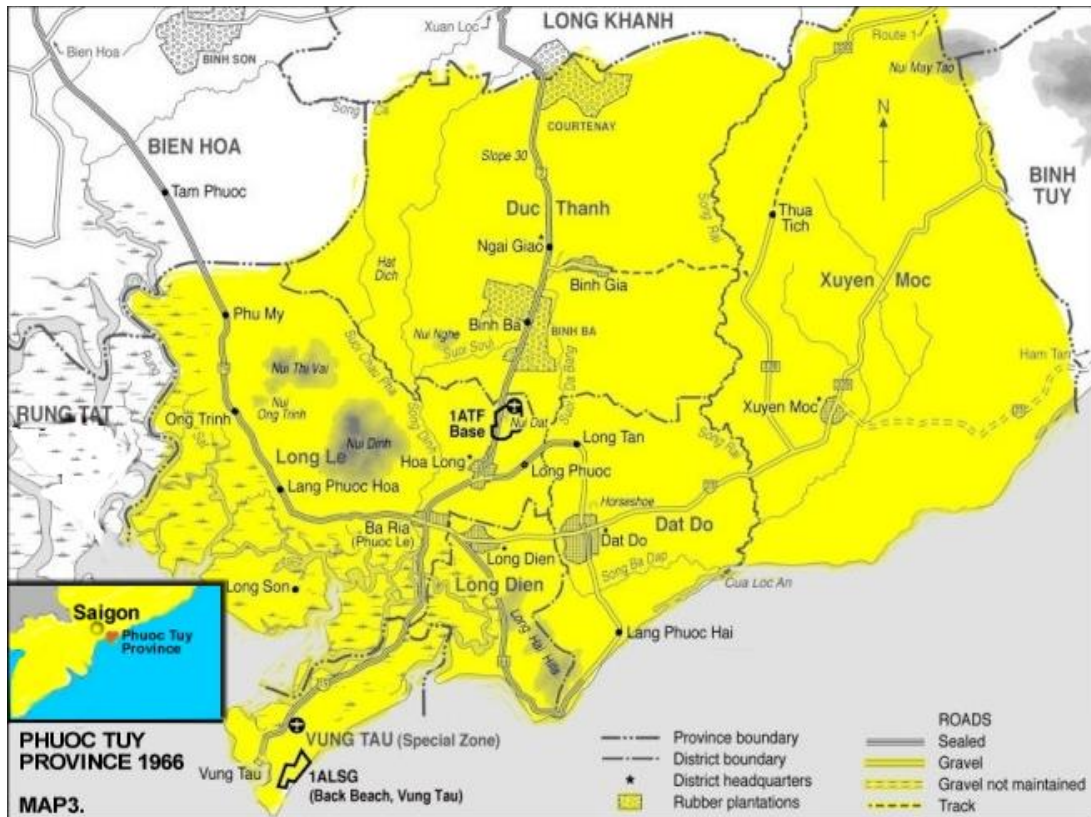
The Australian Government increased its commitment as well, sending an Infantry Battalion, *1RAR*, (1st Battalion Royal Australian Regiment), along with Armoured, Signals and logistical support groups, totaling about 1200 men. The first Australian troops were assigned to a *USA Brigade* stationed at *Bien Hoa Air Base*, near *Saigon*. Other nations including *South Korea* began sending supporting forces as well.

In 1966 Australia increased its commitment to a task force, similar in size to a Brigade, with two (later increased to three) Infantry Battalions, supported by the *RAA* – Royal Australian Artillery-, Tanks and APCs’ – Armoured Personnel Carriers-, Engineers and Ordnance corps, along with air support from *RAAF*, (Royal Australian Air Force), helicopter gunships, troop carriers, and *Canberra Bombers*.

The *RAN* – Royal Australian Navy – contingent included the converted aircraft carrier *HMAS Sydney*, as a means to ferry men and equipment to South Vietnam from Australia.

Given a Province as an operational area, *Phuoc Tuy*, *IATF* – 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Task Force- built an operational base at *Nui Dat*, (see map3.), and set up a large support base, *IALSG* – 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Logistics Support Group – at the port city of *Vung Tau*.

Each unit of Australian committed troops were expected to complete a 12 month *Tour Of Duty*, with each battalion rotating in a sequence that saw 7 Australian battalions touring twice, and 8RAR and 9RAR once over the next 6 years. Remember too, that the *AATTV* were still in-country and operating over the same period.



## 5. Guerrilla warfare

With superior firepower, and modern warfare utilising helicopters to provide mobility to ground forces, Australian forces could deploy in concentrated numbers where needed. However, this firepower and maneuverability relied on an enemy prepared to commit large concentrations of its own forces. The *Viet Cong* and *North Vietnamese Army* components were skilled in the tactical doctrines that *Mao Zedong* – *Mao Tse Tung* – used so successfully against the Japanese and during the *Chinese Civil War*. This doctrine taught them to avoid remaining a static force, offering targets for a superior Army's means of mass destruction. Tactically then, the Australians, and our allies were confronted with *Guerrilla Warfare*.

This type of warfare requires troops to be quickly assembled for a specific task, then just as quickly, disperse before any retaliation, with force, can be made. There are no front lines or rear echelons as in conventional warfare, so there are no 'rear' safe areas; the enemy could be anywhere. In South Vietnam, civilians by day, would often become *Viet Cong Guerrillas* by night. They took active parts in ambushes, planting mines and erecting elaborate booby-traps. Sometimes they assisted in the movement of food and ammunitions and firearms from the villages to military units in the jungles.

The Australian Army quickly developed its own tactics to take the fight to the *Viet Cong*. The favoured conventions of firepower and maneuverability were given over with a preparedness to match the methods used by her enemy. It meant learning the skills of expert bushmen, reading the signs in dense jungle that told of the enemies presence. It meant keeping off worn trails, and being able to patrol for long periods without the need for a resupply, and setting our own ambushes to take on any enemy that broke the nightly curfew.

Australian soldiers employed these skills so successfully that it became the *Viet Cong* who feared being ambushed which was perhaps one reason why so few major battles actually took place in Phuoc Tuy Province in the 10 years of fighting and patrolling. (Some of the major battles that did occur will be addressed later).

There were however plenty of small scale engagements with the enemy while ambushing round the villages and in operations in the remote areas of the Province. Mostly, contact with the enemy came about because the Australians had located the enemy by forceful patrolling, and not through enemy initiative.



Map showing extent of tunnels near Cu Chi

The guerilla enemy hid from view using the jungle canopy and extensive tunnel complexes.. Some tunnel complexes were very large and included first aid stations, wireless listening posts, kitchens and ammunition pits.

While some tunnels discovered by Australians led to food, weapons and ammunitions caches, other more major complexes, like the tunnels of Cu Chi, near Saigon, were so vast, and connected with other complexes further afield, that the overall system was said to be more than 200 miles of tunnels .This particular system housed a hospital and class rooms, as well as war rooms where officers would plan their attacks from.

The tunnels were used by enemy soldiers as hiding spots during air attacks, as well as serving as communication and supply routes, hospitals, food and weapon caches and living quarters for numerous North Vietnamese fighters. The tunnel systems were of great importance to the Viet Cong in their resistance to Australian forces, and helped to counter the growing military effort.

*Guerrilla* armies, like the *Viet Cong*, do not consider their immediate actions as the final solution, but as a way to wear down their enemy both physically and psychologically whilst remaining intact themselves. There will come a time, *Guerilla* armies believe, when they either become strong enough to concentrate and face their enemy or when their enemy's resolve, particularly a foreign enemy, will be so worn down that it will give up or leave. They consider that neither of these objectives may be realised quickly and therefore develop a philosophy of patience.

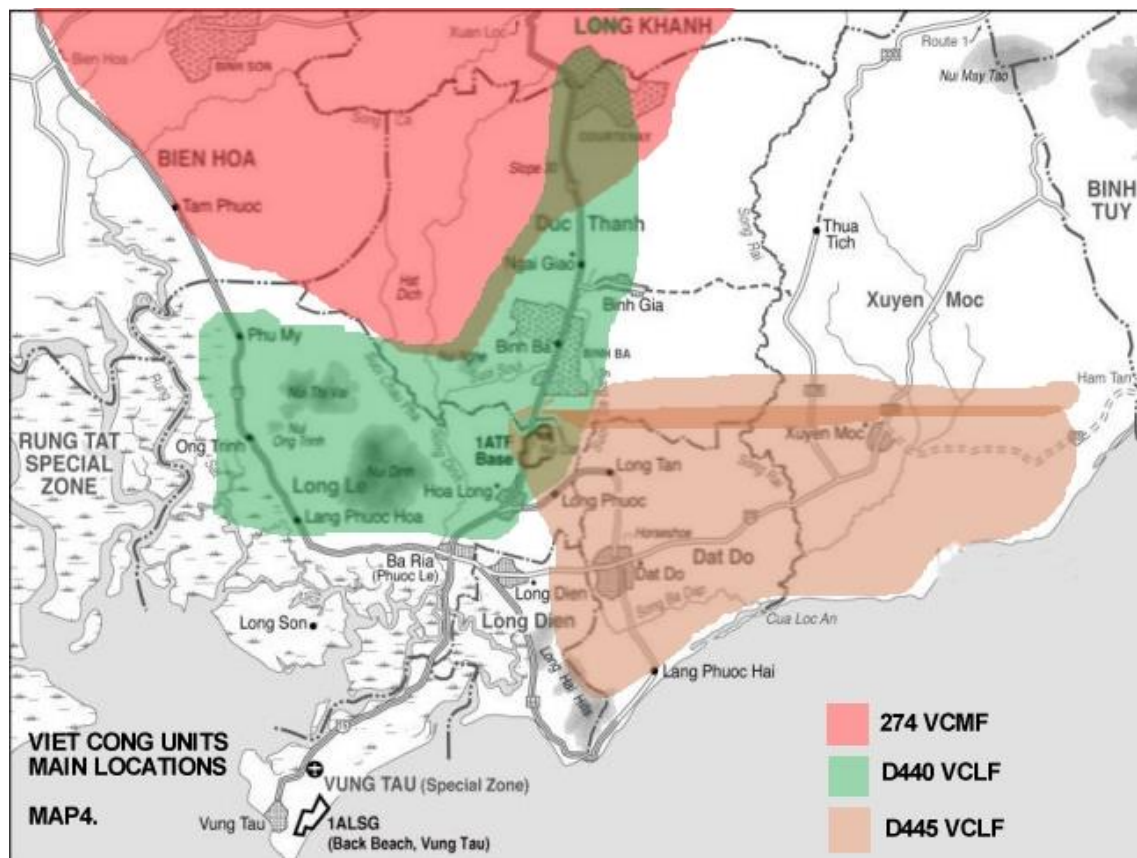
## 6. Viet Cong and others

The enemy faced by *Australian* troops in Phuoc Tuy Province was not a ramshackle bunch of *civilians* seeking to undermine authority and terrorise the populace with their ideology. Rather, they were a highly organised and well informed group wishing to unite Vietnam under the one regime aligned to the government of *North Vietnam*.

Since the withdrawal of the French and the decision not to go to elections in 1956, the *south* became a field of rebellion for those wanting a united *Vietnam* with the north having rule. The *Viet Minh* evolved into what became referred to as the *Viet Cong*. The NVA – *North Vietnam Army* – supported the Viet Cong with weapons, training, and doctrine, even supplying troops and their own advisors to include with larger Viet Cong units.

For Australia the main enemy units in *Phuoc Tuy* province included a regiment strength - approximately 1200 to 1500 men and women - unit known as *274 Viet Cong Main Force Regiment*, which operated to the north-west of *Nui Dat* along the borders with *Bien Hoa* and *Long Khanh* Province and the junction with route 2. Another 2 units of between 350 and 500 men and women, known as *D440* and *D445 Viet Cong Local Force Battalions*, with *D440* dispersing with *274 Regiment* in the north-west and *D445* operating in the south-east from *Dat Do* to the *Long Hai* mountains. (See Map4. for locations).

There were also three substantially district-based *Viet Cong Local Force Companies*: *C23, the Xuyen Moc District Company*, of about 30 to 40 in strength. *C25, the Long Dat District Company*, 110 strong; and *C41, the Chau Duc District Company*, also 110 strong. The lowest level of enemy was found in numerous villages ranging from 8 to 20 strong. All were skilled in Guerilla warfare, and were not beyond the intimidation of those villagers opposed to them.





## 7. Australia's war

Previous paragraphs have given insights into the how, why and when, the *Vietnam War* began, Australia's involvement, and some indication of how the war was fought. This section looks into the war machinery available and how troops reacted to events.

In summary of *Australian* forces, the *Royal Australian Navy* – *RAN* - used the *HMAS Sydney*, a converted Carrier, to transport main force units to and from South Vietnam. It was often escorted by its sister ship, the Aircraft Carrier *HMAS Melbourne*. Warships such as *HMA Ships Vampire, Brisbane, Hobart, Perth and Vendetta*, to name a few, had multiple roles. As well as escorting the *HMASs' Sydney and Melbourne*, they also provided off-shore shelling in support of ground artillery.



**HMAS SYDNEY 1967**

The *RAAF* contingent included *No2 Sqn*, (Squadron), *Canberra Bombers*, *No35 Sqn Caribou* Transporters, and *No9 Sqn* with its famous *Bell UH-1 Iroquois 'Huey'* Gunship and Troop carrier and *Casevac* (Medevac) – Casualty or Medical Evacuation - ready helicopters being the workhorses. By November 1971 *No 9 Sqn* had flown over 230,000 missions, or 'sorties'; carried more than 400,000 passengers, 4,000 Casevac's, and 12,000 tonnes of freight. The Squadron suffered 7 aircraft destroyed or written off and 37 damaged, (23 by ground fire).

Of course, war by its very nature dictates the need for troops on the ground to, in the end, engage and overcome the enemy. So it is paramount that these ground troops be deployed in sufficient numbers, and with ground support, to successfully complete its task. There is much debate over whether 1ATF was given such resources.



(PIC), RAAF 'Huey' Troop Carrier - *UH-1 Iroquois* in action 1970

The *Australian Army*, as mentioned before, deployed with rotating Battalions and support units each completing a 12 month tour of duty. 1ATF included *SAS* and Infantry Troops, Artillery units, Armoured units, with Tanks and APCs, Signalers, Engineers electrical and mechanical, Ammunition Ordnance units, Transport units, Stores, Chefs, and Supply units, to name some.

The soldier sent to South Vietnam was very highly skilled and trained.

The conscripts, or *Nashos*, added another dimension to the mindset. They were a carefully selected lot, 50% of all those called up being rejected on medical or psychological grounds. All who signed on as Regular

soldiers, and those who were called-up, were first required to undergo a 10 weeks of Basic training. This was followed by, for most, a further 10 weeks training in the corps (such as infantry corps or engineer corps) to which they were allocated.

Each corps unit, once warned for service in *South Vietnam*, was then put through another 3 weeks training in jungle warfare. Some completed this final course with a unit that would then deploy complete to Vietnam. Others did the course as individuals then be deployed as a reinforcement to a unit already in country.

(NB: The 3 week jungle training course was reduced to 2 weeks after November 1970).

Upon arrival in *South Vietnam* units completed a 2 week acclimatisation and orientation period before becoming fully operational; ready and very willing to take the fight to anyone who dared.

Our opponents had been fighting those they considered invaders for over 20 years. They were well trained, well motivated, and battle hardened. Enshrined within a mindset to free their country for themselves for a thousand years.

As we shall see in later chapters, the *Australian Army* took the challenge to the enemy on many occasions. However, for now let's look at the support forces in some detail.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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## 8. The RAN in Vietnam

Ships of the *Royal Australian Navy*, (**RAN**), were stationed on continuous operational service in *Vietnam* between 1965 – 1972, with a total of 18 ships serving during the war. Although *HMA Ships Vampire and Quickmatch* made goodwill visits to *Saigon* in 1962, and likewise *HMA Ships Quiberon and Queenborough* during 1963, it was not until 1965 that the *RAN* deployed ships operationally into *Vietnam* waters.

The *RAN* played a variety of roles during the *Vietnam War* with naval vessels ferrying troops and heavy equipment between Australian ports and the *Army* logistics base at *Vung Tau*. The *Navy* also served on the ‘gunline’ where they provided naval gunfire against ground targets in support of *Australian* and *United States* troops. *RAN Clearance Divers* carried out operations to dispose of unexploded ordnance and keep shipping safe from enemy mines and attacks by enemy frogmen.



Naval personnel also served in an airborne role, the *RAN Helicopter Flight Vietnam*, attached to the *United States Army 135th Assault Helicopter Company*, flew combat operations and a detachment of naval aviators also served with the *RAAF's No. 9 Squadron*. Other *RAN* personnel served ashore in *South Vietnam* in medical teams, at the *Australian Embassy in Saigon*, or as advisors at *IATF Nui Dat*.

During the *Vietnam War* the task of moving, supplying and maintaining *Australian* forces in *South Vietnam* was shared between the *RAAF*, civilian aircraft – mainly *Qantas* – and ships from the *Australian National Line* (*ANL*). With the refusal of civilian merchant navy to support the troops in *Vietnam* in the

form of protest, the *Navy* commissioned 2 ships, renaming them from designated *MV Vessels* to *HMAS Boonaroo* – 1 voyage as an *ANL MV* in 1966 then under the white ensign in 1967- and the *HMAS Jeparit*. The *Jeparit* went on to make over 40 trips carrying *Centurion* tanks and other heavy equipment to and from *Vietnam*.

However the bulk of the task fell to the *RAN* and the vessel that carried out the majority of transport duties to and from *Vietnam* was the former aircraft carrier, now a converted troop carrier, *HMAS Sydney*, affectionately known as *The Vung Tau Ferry*.

*HMAS Sydney's* first voyage to *South Vietnam*, began on 27 May 1965 and she was escorted by *HMA Ships Melbourne, Duchess and Parramatta*. For *HMAS Sydney's* crew, the trip meant the chance to both establish routines for a logistic task, and to gain an understanding of the risks facing their ship in hostile waters. In the years to come, the run to *Vung Tau* and back became an increasingly speedy and smoother operation.

*HMAS Sydney* made 25 round voyages from *Australia* to *South Vietnam* between 1965 and 1972, each trip taking between 10 and 12 days, carrying more than 16,000 *Army* and *RAAF* personnel, almost 6,000 tons of cargo and 2,375 vehicles, during the 8 year period.

For those on the return voyage after their twelve-month *tour of duty*, the passage to *Australia* offered a chance to relax, to reflect on their experiences and to prepare themselves for the transition from war to peace. Such a period of reflection was denied to those soldiers who returned home by aircraft, leaving *Vietnam* and being home within 10 hours.

Although many *Vietnam veterans* recall being ignored upon their return to Australia. This was not the case for those who returned with their battalions on board *HMAS Sydney*. When the ship docked, the infantry were often met by dignitaries, including the Minister for the Army, and a march through the city - *Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide or Townsville* - usually followed within hours.

RAN ships were called on for escort duties during the *Vietnam* war and ran the gauntlet through hostile waters for both *Australian* and *US Ships* bringing troops and supplies to *Vietnam*. These included the *HMA Ships Anzac, Derwent, Duchess, Parramatta, Stuart, Swan, Torrens, Vampire and Yarra*, along with the *Aircraft Carrier HMAS Melbourne*.

Australia's largest naval commitment to the *Vietnam War* was the provision of destroyers, on 6 month rotation, to serve on the 'gunline' – delivering naval gunfire support for ground forces – with the US 7th Fleet. *HMA Ships Hobart, Perth and Brisbane* all served on multiple six-monthly rotations between 1967 and 1971. The *Daring Class* destroyer, *HMAS Vendetta* served one tour of duty on the gunline during 1969. RAN utilised the 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet Naval Base of *Subic Bay* in the *Philippines* for re-supply, repairs, maintenance and R&R leave.

*HMA Ships Hobart* and *Perth* were also involved in *Sea Dragon Operations* along the *North Vietnamese* coast between 1966 and 1968. Ships serving on 'Sea Dragon' interdicted enemy attempts at seaborne infiltration and resupply along the *North Vietnamese* coast from the *Demilitarised Zone* to the *Red River* delta near *Hanoi* and often came under heavy and accurate fire from shore-based batteries. For the ships of the RAN serving in the waters off *Vietnam*, these operations were amongst the most dangerous of the war.



The first destroyer deployed in March 1967 was *HMAS Hobart* and was immediately assigned to 'Gunline' duties with *US Ships 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet*. She fired off 100 5 inch rounds on the first day. Swapping duties between *Operation Sea Dragon*, escorts, and on the 'Gunline', problems with the guns and ammunition saw her return to *Subic Bay* for self-repairs several times during the first 6 month 'tour'.

The destroyer was fired on by shore batteries several times, and on one occasion took minor shrapnel damage. Several explosions in 5-inch/54 gun mounts during April saw all similarly equipped destroyers (including *Hobart*) reassigned to other duties while investigations into the cause (believed to be a bad batch of ammunition) were explored. It is well to remember that this problem was not confined to *Australian* ships and effected *US Ships* as well.

In July, *Hobart* was double tasked to the *USS Forrestal* escort group and *Sea Dragon* operations; three destroyers were required to escort the carrier at any time, with any additional ships operating on *Sea Dragon* duties. On 29 July, a fire aboard the carrier necessitated her removal from the operational area; *Hobart* was one of the ships assigned to escort and assist with casualties.

The remainder of her tour saw little action apart from an in-close amphibious interjection by *US Marines* during the 'Beacon Hill' landings close to *Gio Linh*. *HMAS Perth* arrived in September 1967 and the *Hobart* sailed for home.

*Hobart* returned in March 1968 for her second deployment and in June tragedy struck when *Hobart* came under attack from what the commander had identified as 'friendly' aircraft. In the meantime whilst *HMAS Hobart* had been trying to establish its identity, the aircraft launched a missile which hit the 'Hobart' amidships on the starboard side, behind a boat davit. The warhead passed through 01 Deck and penetrated several areas amidships until it finished up in the forward funnel. In its passage it killed one sailor and wounded two others.

'Hobart's' crew clambered to Action Stations, and 3 and a half minutes later another two missiles fired from close range slammed into her. Again, on the starboard side. The 2nd missile entered just below 1 Deck, but luckily the warhead did not explode. The 80 Man Aft Seamen's Mess wore a large part of this missile. The 3rd missile hit her very near the site of the first and the warhead passed through to the No 2 Missile Director. One more sailor was killed and several wounded by part of the missile warhead.

The *Hobart* fired off 5 rounds of 5 inch shells and the aircraft did not attack again. It was only after she pulled out of the action and headed for Subic Bay that 'Hobart's' crew cleared away the damage and recovered parts of the missiles, that it was found to have come from the USAF. Oddly, it was discovered later that *HMAS Hobart* was one of several ships attacked by 'friendly' aircraft between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> June 1968. However, by the end of July, after repairs and a re-fit, The *Hobart* was back on duty on the gun line.



*Pic crtsy D. Hamner OAM – Shows Dennis as a young 18 year old aside one of the holes left by 'friendly fire'.*

*Hobart* returned to Vietnam for her third tour on 28 March 1970, taking over from the Daring class destroyer *HMAS Vendetta*. After working up, the destroyer relieved a US Ship from gunline duties. The ship moved north to near the Demilitarized Zone. At the end of April, the ship sailed to Subic for maintenance. After this was completed, *Hobart* returned to gunline duties and remained on station until 24 May, when the destroyer sailed to Singapore for maintenance. Between June and September 1970 *Hobart* resumed gunline operations, only breaking off for a gun rebarreling and maintenance in *Singapore* and a Naval Excercise off *Bangkok* during August. *Hobart* was called to relieve *USS Lloyd Thomas* on the gunline after an explosion in one of the American destroyer's gun mounts. On 22 September, *Hobart* sailed to *Subic*. The destroyer was relieved by *HMAS Perth* on 26 September. Two personnel were *Mentioned In Despatches*, and 23 *Naval Board commendations* were issued for the deployment. *HMAS Hobart* received the battle honour "*Vietnam 1967–70*" for her wartime services.



*HMAS Perth* steamed over 149,000 miles on active service in the Vietnam War, fired some 30,711 five-inch rounds and came under fire on five occasions. She was awarded the United States Navy Unit Commendation after her first deployment, and the United States Navy Meritorious Unit Commendation after her second deployment.

The destroyer's first assignment was the gunline off the II Corps operating area, In September 1967, where the *Perth* was specifically tasked with providing gunfire support for the *1st Cavalry Division* of the *United States Army*. Three days later, *Perth* was reassigned to the northern part of South Vietnam, in response to increased *North Vietnamese* activity.

On 2 October, both turrets broke down; both were repaired, but the aft turret failed again the next evening, with the new problem beyond repair until replacement parts were air-dropped. She was redeployed to *Sea Dragon* operations on 16 October, and on the morning of 18 October, the destroyer was fired on by coastal artillery while investigating a group of fishing junks; *Perth* was hit once, with the shell deflecting off the aft gun turret and penetrating the superstructure to start a fire. The gun turret captain was later awarded a *Distinguished Service Medal* for his actions in response to the attack, while the officer of the watch was *mentioned in despatches* for courage and calmness under fire. Six days later the *Perth* and a US Ship fired on six small enemy supply craft, sinking five.

In February, with the destroyer returning to the Sea Dragon force, the commanding officer of *Perth* was appointed overall commander of both the northern and southern task units; the northern unit was normally led by the commander of the assigned cruiser, but the US Ship was in dock for maintenance. On 23 March, *Perth* withdrew to *Subic* to conclude her tour of duty, and was replaced later that month by the *Hobart*.

*HMAS Perth* was awarded the *United States Navy Unit Commendation* for her service during the deployment. In addition to the two personnel awards for actions in response to the 18 October hit, *Perth's* commanding officer was *Mentioned in Despatches*, and 22 personnel received *Naval Board commendations*.

On 19 September 1968, *Perth* departed from Sydney to replace *Hobart* in the Vietnam warzone. En route, a training exercise with *RAAF* aircraft revealed that one of the radars and both *identification-friend-or-foe* units had defects, which were repaired in *Subic*.

*Perth* relieved her sister ship on 29 September, and after exercising with the Seventh Fleet, deployed to the gunline on 5 October. Four days later, the destroyer sailed north to relieve *USS Berkeley* as leader of the northern Sea Dragon unit, as that destroyer was experiencing faults with her gun turrets and targeting computer. The next day, *Perth* and *USS Furse* were joined by the battleship *USS New Jersey*, with the battleship taking command of the unit and the Australian destroyer was reassigned back to the southern force. On 21 October, a day after rejoining the northern Sea Dragon unit, the destroyer observed the return of 14 North Vietnamese prisoners-of-war.

Two days later, a failure of the counter-recoil mechanism in the forward turret forced *Perth* to withdraw from *Sea Dragon* and sail south to less-demanding gunline duties off *Danang*. She remained on station until November 1968, when *Operation Sea Dragon* was cancelled completely. The ship was assigned to the II Corps area on 12 November, providing gunfire support for a battalion of the Korean *26th Regiment*, then later relocated south to the IV Corps area to provide similar services for the South Vietnamese *7th* and *9th Divisions*.

*Perth* returned to the gunline off *Danang* on 12 December, sailed back to the IV Corps area four days later, then effectively turned around on arrival as the ship was ordered to sail to the II Corps area and provide gunfire support for *Operation McLain*; firing 511 rounds in one day. On 19 December, *Perth* sailed back to IV Corps, where, apart from a brief deployment to Taiwan at the start of 1969, she remained until 20 January.

*Perth* was assigned to the destroyer screen of the aircraft carrier *USS Kitty Hawk* for ten days, sailed to *Subic* for maintenance on 7 February, then returned to naval gunfire support duties on 22 February. From 25 to 28 February, the ship operated in support of *Operation Victory Dragon VIII*, and fired 690 shells at a variety of targets. *Perth* continued on fire support operations until 16 March, when she completed her second deployment..

*Perth* was awarded the *United States Navy Meritorious Unit Commendation* for the second deployment. An appointment as a *Commander of the Order of the British Empire*, two *Mentioned in Despatches*, and 25 *Naval Board commendations* recognised the achievements of individual personnel during the tour of duty.

*Perth's* third and final tour of duty in *Vietnamese* waters began on the ship's arrival in *Subic* on 26 September 1970. After relieving *Hobart* and completing work-up trials, the destroyer arrived off *Danang* on 3 October and took up gunline duties in *Military Region 1*. On 23 October, the ship supported a *United States Navy SEALs* team. On 26 October, *Perth* sailed to *Subic* for maintenance and rebarrelling, and returned to gunline operations on 4 November. On 14 November, both gun turrets became unusable, although the aft turret was restored later that day. Two days later, the ship sailed south to *Military Region 3*. On 2 December, the destroyer moved further south to *Military Region 4*.

After a brief break away for personnel shore leave, the *Australian* warship returned to duties in January with a five-day stint at *Yankee Station*, escorting the carrier *USS Hancock* during *Rolling Thunder* operations. *Perth* was then assigned to the gunline at *Military Region 4*. The forward gun turret became unusable again during the latter part of January, and the destroyer sailed to *Bangkok* for repairs, then *Subic* for maintenance and repairs.

The ship returned to service in February, operating across *Military Regions 2 and 3*. There was minimal activity when operating off *Military Region 3*, as the presence of a gunfire support vessel was unexpected, thus no pre-planned fire missions had been made. *Perth* left the gunline for the final time in March, and was attached to the escort group of *USS Ranger*. Five days later, she sailed to *Hong Kong*, then *Subic*, to conclude her Vietnam deployment. The destroyer was relieved by *HMAS Brisbane* on 29 March 1971.

Personnel awards for the deployment included one appointment as a *Member of the Order of the British Empire*, two instances of *Mentioned in Despatches*, and 26 *Naval Board commendations*.



*HMAS Brisbane* arrived in Vung Tau, South Vietnam, on 15 April 1969 for her first deployment in *Vietnam* and conducted her first *Naval Gunfire Support* (NGS) mission that evening. Apart from a brief period to repair and replace a damaged gun barrel, after a premature explosion, the '*Brisbane*' remained on the gunline until relieved by the *Daring Class* destroyer *HMAS Vendetta* in September 1969.

*Brisbane* returned to Sydney on 13 October where she began preparations for refit during which she was fitted with the *Ikara anti-submarine guided missile system*. After sea trials and exercises during 1970, she returned to *Vietnam* and the gunline in March 1971.

This proved to be the RAN's last gunline deployment. She arrived in Subic Bay, via Manus Island, on 28 March and arrived in the AO on 5 April. Her first period on the gunline was comparatively quiet conducting multiple NGS missions in the regions known as *Military Regions 3 and 4*, south of Phan Thiet.

*HMAS Brisbane* relieved *USS Floyd B. Parks* as the commander of TU 70.8.9, marking the first time an RAN officer held the position of Gunline Commander. She operated just south of the Demilitarized Zone until joining the destroyer screen for the aircraft carrier, *USS Kitty Hawk*, on 31 May. She departed the AO on 12 June for Hong Kong where her stay was interrupted by Typhoon Freda. She returned to the gunline on 24 June once again operating in *Military Regions 3 and 4*, and visited Subic Bay and Hong Kong before returning to the gunline for her final stint in Vietnamese waters on 15 August. This period was spent near the Demilitarized Zone where there was a marked increase in enemy activity and a commensurate increase in NGS missions.

Over the course of her two deployments to Vietnam, *Brisbane* had steamed nearly 70,000nm and fired some 16,000 rounds of 5-inch ammunition. The ship earned high praise from the Commander of the US Navy's 7th Fleet who said that the ship's crew had attained 'a most enviable reputation for extreme dedication and true professionalism, which was in keeping with the fine tradition established by a long series of predecessors'. Her performance during the year was recognised with the awarding of the *Duke of Gloucester's Cup* for 1971.



In 1968, it was realised that the combination of maintenance requirements and other operational deployments meant that none of the RAN's three US-built Perth class destroyers would be available to serve in the Vietnam War once HMAS Brisbane completed her deployment in late 1969. They started investigating the possibility of deploying a Daring class destroyer, with the main concern being the supply of 4.5-inch (110 mm) shells, as the USN destroyers were standardised to 5-inch (130 mm) shells. After receiving reassurance from the USN, HMAS Vendetta was marked for the deployment in November 1968, as she was the only available Daring or River class vessel available. The decision to send Vendetta meant that the consistent deployment of an Australian warship with the United States

Seventh Fleet since March 1967 would continue, and steps towards breaking a 'two-tier' culture within the RAN favouring the Perth class ships would be made, with associated benefits to morale.

On 15 September 1969, Vendetta left Australia for South Vietnam, and relieved Brisbane at Subic on 26 September. While deployed to Vietnam, the destroyer was placed under the administrative control of Commander Australian Forces Vietnam in addition to that of the Flag Officer Commanding Australian Fleet, while operationally, she was under the command of the US Seventh Fleet. A USN lieutenant was assigned to Vendetta to serve as a liaison. Australia was the only allied nation to provide naval support to the United States Navy during the Vietnam War. The destroyer's main activities were the provision of naval gunfire support to assist ground forces, particularly the United States Marine Corps units operating closest to the North Vietnam border. Seven ships were usually stationed on the 'gunline', and attacks fell into two categories: 'unspotted' shelling of areas where North Vietnamese or Viet Cong forces and facilities were known or believed to be, and 'spotted' fire missions in direct support of ground troops.

Vendetta sailed for a gunline assignment at Danang at the end of September, and she commenced naval gunfire support missions almost immediately. After time at Danang, the ship sailed to the II Corps operating area, and continued gunline duties between I, II, and III Corp. At the end of November, the destroyer sailed to Taiwan for rebarrelling and other maintenance. She returned to the gunline on 21 December, and on 1 January 1970, was called on to assist Market Time operations by firing on two small craft suspected to be on a supply run to Viet Cong positions.

On 17 January, Vendetta was forced to sail to Hong Kong for boiler repairs. Returning on 17 February, the destroyer was assigned to III Corps, and operated off Vung Tau in support of Australian and South Vietnamese units, along with a mercenary group. Four days later, she was reassigned to II Corps. On 6 March, the ship left the gunline to have two of her turrets rebarrelled at Subic, then returned to duty on 13 March. The destroyer sailed to Subic on 23 March, and was relieved by HMAS Hobart on 30 March, after having fired 13,295 4.5-inch shells at 751 targets over five deployments.

The destroyer was the only Australian-built warship to serve as a combatant in Vietnam, and the only Daring class destroyer to be operationally deployed in the shore bombardment role. Vendetta's deployment to Vietnam under the new Australian White Ensign, and patrols during the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation under the old ensign (identical to the British White Ensign), made the destroyer one of only two RAN vessels to deploy operationally under both ensigns. Personnel awards for the deployment included one appointment as an Officer of the Order of the British Empire, two Mentioned in Despatches, and 16 Naval Board commendations.



## RAN Helicopter Flight Vietnam (EMU)



The Experimental Military Unit (EMU) was a joint Australian-American company-sized helicopter assault force which operated during the *Vietnam War*. The unit was created in 1967 following a request from the *United States* military for *Australia* to send more helicopter pilots to the conflict. As the only available experienced pilots were from the *Royal Australian Navy (RAN) Fleet Air Arm*, (with *Australian Army* and *RAAF* pilots already heavily committed).

The *RAN Helicopter Flight Vietnam (RANHFV)* was formed and integrated into the *135th Assault Helicopter Company* of the *United States Army*. The *EMU* unit name was selected by the *Americans* as a backronym for the Australian bird, a choice which amused the *Australians*: despite being large, fast, and highly mobile, the Emu cannot fly.

The unit flew multiple variants of the *UH-1 Iroquois (Huey)* helicopter, and was primarily tasked with providing transport and support for the *Australian Army* and units of the *Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN)*, *United States Army* and *Marine Corps*. A typical day's operations consisted of ten transports (supported by four *gunships* and a command unit) collecting a unit of soldiers, performing a combat assault, then returning the unit to base.

Other operations included dawn and dusk assaults, night hunter-killer patrols, and supporting *United States Navy SEAL* units in the capture of senior *Viet Cong* personnel.

Although the *RAN* contingent was significantly smaller than the rest of the unit, the *Australian* personnel frequently found themselves in senior positions, due to having more extensive training and experience than their *American* counterparts.

Initially operating out of *Vung Tau*, the *EMU* was relocated to the *Xuan Loc district* at the end of 1967. In late 1968, the unit was moved to near *Bien Hoa*. In mid-1970, the *EMU* was tasked to operations into *Cambodia*, but as the *rules of engagement* for the *Australians* forbade them from operating outside *Vietnam*, the unit operated under-strength for several days until being re-tasked back to *Vietnam* operations.

Later that year, the unit was relocated to *Dong Tam*. The *RANHFV* was withdrawn from *Vietnam* in 1971, ending the joint unit. The *Australian* contingent was the most heavily decorated *RAN* unit to serve in the *Vietnam War*, and the one with the highest casualty rate.

The *Australian* personnel who received a number of honours and decorations included 3 appointed *Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE)*, 8 received the *Distinguished Service Cross (DSC)*, 5 the *Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC)*, and 1 received the *British Empire Medal (BEM)*. 24 were *Mentioned in Despatches*, and 34 received *Naval Board Commendations*. This was over half of the honours and awards presented to *RAN* personnel serving in the *Vietnam War*. Australian personnel were also awarded several *Vietnamese* and *United States* decorations.

Five *RAN* personnel assigned to the *EMU* were killed during the conflict, with another ten seriously injured: the highest casualty rate of any *RAN* unit in *Vietnam*. *723 Squadron RAN*, the parent unit of the *RAN Helicopter Flight Vietnam*, was awarded the battle honour "Vietnam 1967–71".



## RAN Clearance Diving Team

The need for clearance and commando divers demonstrated during and after World War II prompted the *Australian Commonwealth Naval Board* to establish a clearance diving branch within the *RAN* in 1951. Divers were initially attached to the *Underwater Research and Development Unit*. In 1956, they were organised into a separate *Mobile Clearance Diving Team*.

In March 1966, the divers underwent further reorganisation, splitting into two *Clearance Diving Teams*, known as *CDT 1* and *CDT 2*, both confined to Australian waters. *CDT 1* was the operational team assigned to mine clearance and reconnaissance operations throughout Australia, while *CDT 2* was dedicated to mine warfare in the Sydney area, but neither were cleared for operations outside this area.

In late 1966, *Clearance Diving Team 3 (CDT 3)* was established specifically for deployment to the *Vietnam War* to assist the overworked *United States Navy Explosive Ordnance Disposal* units, and to train *RAN* personnel in clearance diving work in an operational environment.



Sending *CDT 1* or *CDT 2*, in full or in part, would have impacted on the teams' existing commitments, along with the continuity of training and postings. *CDT 3* was formed from available personnel, and this was sufficient to keep a six-man team on station in *Vietnam* from early 1967 until early 1971, with six-month deployments.

The *RAN's diver training* program is centred on a 10-day clearance diver acceptance test (CDAT), colloquially known as "hell week". Recruits begin each day at 02:00, and are put through over thirty staged dives designed to test their strength and endurance.

Upon passing selection recruits must successfully pass a number of specialist courses to become fully qualified. The Basic Clearance Diver Course spans 37 weeks whilst the Advanced Clearance Diver Course and the Clearance Diving component of the Mine warfare and Clearance Diving Officers course, known as MCT-EOD, spans 41 weeks. The *MCT-EOD* role requires clearance divers to be familiar with *TAG* specialist insertion techniques including diving, fast roping and parachuting to be able to integrate into the unit to provide IED expertise.

In 1966 during a tour of *South-East Asia*, a team of *Australian* clearance divers spent a week on an unscheduled operational attachment to a *United States Navy Explosive Ordnance Disposal* team based near *Saigon*. Brief and unofficial though their sojourn was, they became the first *Australian* clearance divers to serve in *Vietnam*.

The task that faced the eight *Australian Naval Clearance Diving teams* in *Vietnam* was complex and dangerous. The country's long coast and many rivers, and the large *Mekong Delta* near *Saigon* gave the *North Vietnamese* and the *Viet Cong* many opportunities to attack and disrupt shipping with mines and underwater obstacles, often planted by sappers known as swimmers. The attempts to combat these threats to shipping were collectively labelled 'Stable Door' operations and these were the primary task of the *Australian* clearance divers.

Large merchant ships, often carrying military supplies, were a particularly valuable target as were military vessels, especially those that operated in *Vietnam's* rivers. The *Viet Cong* and *North Vietnamese* used a range of mine types against shipping including moored and floating mines as well as those placed on the bottom of a watercourse. In the north of the country *Soviet-manufactured limpet mines* were used.

The mines were also transported and placed in a variety of ways. In some instances they were tethered beneath a sampan by cables that could be cut if the vessel was approached. The most common method, however, was to have the mines placed by swimmers who had been trained in *North Vietnam*.

In addition to combating attacks on shipping, *Australian Naval Clearance Divers* were engaged in disposing of ordnance that had become unsafe, and in salvage operations. These included diving around downed aircraft to remove classified material and render any explosive material safe. After mid-1968 the *Australians* were also involved in operations with the *South Vietnamese* armed forces during which they cleared barriers along the approaches to suspected enemy positions.

All eight clearance diving contingents performed difficult, dangerous tasks, often in very unpleasant conditions. The waters in which they generally operated carried swift currents, were murky – reducing visibility considerably – and choppy. The materials with which the divers worked were unstable and, if handled incorrectly, lethal. Their work did not have the same profile as that carried out by *Australian* naval vessels or aviators, but it was vital to the safety of shipping, both military and civilian, in *South Vietnam*.

In August 1970 *CDT 3* was relieved at *Vung Tau* by *South Vietnamese Navy* personnel and airlifted to *Da Nang*. In three and a half years on Operation *Stable Door*, *CDT 3* searched 7,441 ships. The eighth and final contingent returned to *Australia* in May 1971, bringing to a close four years of war service in trying and hazardous circumstances. The contingents had rotated through *Vietnam* at approximately six to seven month intervals. The one fatal casualty was a young sailor killed in a motor vehicle accident while on exchange with an *American* unit in *Cam Ranh Bay*.

*CDT 3* was awarded the United States Presidential Unit Citation the United States Navy Unit Commendation twice and the United States Meritorious Unit Commendation for its mine clearance work. Seven personnel were decorated whilst others received recognition from the *United States* and *South Vietnamese* governments.

## **9. The RAAF in Vietnam**

During the *Vietnam War* the *Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF)*, contributed *Caribou STOL*, (Short Take Off and Landing), transport aircraft as part of the *RAAF Transport Flight Vietnam*, later redesignated *No. 35 Squadron RAAF*. Also the famed workhorse ('Huey') *UH-1 Iroquois* helicopters from *No. 9 Squadron RAAF*, and *English Electric Canberra* bombers from *No. 2 Squadron RAAF*, and the large lift carrier *Hercules* of *36* and *37 Squadrons*.

*RAAF DHC-4A Caribou* aircraft were in the process of delivery from Canada to Australia, when it was realised that the short take off and landing capabilities would be of benefit in *Vietnam*. Three aircraft were diverted from *Butterworth, Malaysia* to *Vietnam*, and arrived at *Vung Tau* on 8 August 1964. These three aircraft became *RAAF Transport Flight Vietnam (RTFV)* and operated as part of the *Southeast Asia Airlift System* and under the operational command of the *USA 315th Troop Carrier Group (Assault)* of the *315th Air Commando Wing, 2nd Air Division*.

*RTFV* was redesignated *35 (Transport) Squadron* on 1 June 1966 with fifteen aircraft. This followed quickly with the introduction of the long haul '*Herchues*' Aircraft squadrons '*36*' and '*37*', transporting soldiers and equipment direct from Australia to Vietnam, including the return of wounded soldiers on medically equipped craft.



During its seven and a half years in *Vietnam* the *Caribous* (as both *RTFV* and *35 Squadron*) had established an outstanding record of achievement for such a small unit, having flown nearly 80,000 sorties totalling 47,000 hours in the air, and carried more than 677,000 passengers, 36 million kg of freight and 5 million kg of mail. In achieving such loads, the Australian aircraft, crews and ground staff had set standards of flying, flying maintenance and safety unmatched by either American or VNAF transport squadrons.



Based at *RAAF Base Rishmond*, west of Sydney, *36 Squadron* operated its fleet of *C-130A Hercules* aircraft on regular services to *Bien Hoa*, *Tan Son Nhut*, *Phan Rang*, *Vung Tau* and *Nui Dat* on logistic support for the *Australian Task Force (IATF)*, including *medivac* flights of wounded personnel. Also, *37 Squadron*, was equipped with the *C-130E Hercules*, and was employed mainly in the *medevac* role in specially modified aircraft, normal logistic flights were also flown to and

from *Vietnam*. Both *Hercules* squadrons flew intensively during the withdrawal of *IATF* in 1972.

*No 2 Squadron RAAF* with the famed *Canberra Bomber* deployed from Butterworth, Malaysia to Phan Rang air base, 35 kilometres south of Cam Ranh Bay, a large *USAF* base in the far east of South Vietnam, on 19 April 1967. *2 SQN 'Magpies'* were part of the *35th Tactical Fighter Wing* and were tasked by *USHQ 7th Air Force* in *Saigon*, for eight sorties per day for seven days a week, in all areas of *South Vietnam* from April 1967 until its return to *Australia* in 1971.



The *Canberra* filled a gap in the *USAF* inventory as it was the only tactical aircraft in *South Vietnam* which bombed, visually, from straight and level flight, albeit at 350 knots, prior to 1972. Flying about 5% of the Wing's sorties, *2 SQN* was credited with 16% of the bomb damage assessment.

The *Canberra Bombers* flew 11,963 bombing sorties, and two aircraft were lost. One went missing during a bombing raid, and not recovered until April 2009. The remains of the (2) crew members were found in July 2009. The other was shot down by a surface-to-air missile, although both crew were rescued. The bombers dropped 76,389 bombs and were credited with 786 enemy personnel confirmed killed and a further 3,390 estimated killed, 8,637 structures, 15,568 bunkers, 1,267 sampans and 74 bridges destroyed. *RAAF* transport aircraft also supported *South Vietnam Army (ARVN)* ground forces. The squadron was awarded the *Vietnam Gallantry Cross Unit Citation* and a *United States Air Force Outstanding Unit Commendation* for its service in Vietnam.

The last *Canberra* mission in *Vietnam* was 31 May 1971 and was tasked in support of the *US 101st Airborne Division* in the *A Shau Valley*, an area frequented by the squadron many times over the previous two years. The squadron departed Phan Rang on 4 June 1971, arriving back in Amberley on 5 June, 13 years since it deployed to Malaya in 1958. *No 2 Squadron* air and ground crews performed exceptionally well in the air war in South Vietnam and carried on the fine traditions of strike squadrons in the *RAAF*.



The UH-1 'Iroquois' (or 'Hueys' as they were affectionately called), helicopters were used in many roles including medical evacuation and close air support of ground troops. Reformed in June 1962, '9 Squadron RAAF' was to be a *Search and Rescue* unit equipped with Bell UH-1Bs which were on order. Experimental Army support tasks, with heavily armed 'Huey gunships' quickly supplanted the *SAR* role due to their success. In this role the unit deployed to Vung Tau, becoming operational with eight *choppers* on 13 June 1966. 9 Squadron delivered ammunition and food to *Australian* troops in the field, carried out troop insertions and extractions and were

called on *Dust-Off* to evacuate wounded and other troops from the battle area. They were also involved with psy-war operations, dropping leaflets produced and provided by the *US Army's Psychological and Passive Warfare Department* and even aerial spraying of insecticides and herbicides around the *Australian* bases of *Nui Dat* and *Vung Tau*.

Almost immediately after arrival, 9 Squadron Hueys were working closely with the *Australian Special Air Service* who maintained long range patrols. On 10 July 1966 two aircraft performed a hot extraction of a six-man *SAS* patrol. This type of action continued throughout the war and saved many who were being hotly pursued by an aggressive enemy force.



As with *SAS* operations, 9 Squadron became involved in *casevac (dustoff)* soon after arriving in *Vietnam*. On 25 July 1966 five *Iroquois* flew out twenty members of *6RAR* who had been killed or wounded during *Operation Hobart* north-east of *Long Tan*. *USAF F-100s* carried out air strikes on enemy positions only 100 metres from the landing area while the *Hueys* came in one at a time.

Another example of the extreme situations crew found themselves in was on 21 August 1969 during an evacuation of wounded *5RAR* personnel. During the hover to winch up the casualties the *Huey* came under sustained small arms and *RPG* attack. Both crewman were hit by bullets but saved from injury by their body armour, though a casualty was twice further wounded. Subsequently the aircraft was found to be holed in eleven places, including one round which had passed between the pilot's feet and smashed through the instrument panel and another which had holed the fuel tank.



*9 Squadron's* last missions were flown on 19 November 1971 and on 8 December the majority of the squadron's aircraft were embarked on *HMAS Sydney* and shipped back to *Australia*. During five and a half years in *Vietnam*, the unit's helicopters had flown over 237,000 sorties during which they had carried over 414,000 passengers, 4000 casevacs and nearly 12,000 tonnes of freight. The squadron suffered seven aircraft written off or destroyed and 37 damaged, 23 by ground fire; four members of the unit were killed, along with two others while attached to the squadron, and many more had been injured.

Total *RAAF* casualties in *Vietnam* included six killed in action, eight non-battle fatalities, 30 wounded in action and 30 injured. A small number of *RAAF* pilots also served in *United States Air Force* units, flying *F-4 Phantom* fighter-bombers or serving as forward air controllers.

## **10. The Army in Vietnam**

The *Australian Army*, as committed to *South Vietnam*, deployed to areas cutting a huge swathe through *South Vietnam* including regions around *Saigon*, (Now *Ho Chi Minh City*), *Vung Tau*, and several units found themselves in other provinces such as *Bien Hoa*, *Long Khan*, and even *Danang*, and not just confined to the main area of operations within *Phouc Toy Province*.

In its role as the main protagonist against the *NVA* and main force *Viet Cong*, including the local village guerrilla, the *Army* became involved with the populace, both military and civil, throughout *Phuoc Toy Province*. Interaction with the *South Vietnam Army – Army of the Republic of Vietnam* – or *ARVN* as they were known, was a necessity, as was operations including the *USA* forces.

Logistically, to keep a main force army operational in the field, there needed to be a substantial array of equipment, transport, armoured and artillery support, medico doctors, dentists, nurses, cooks, not to mention engineers to build or demolish, and radio signalers, and armorers. When you think of an army, it must also include all corp units in support.

The task force base at *Nui Dat* became the core operational centre point for all army activities in the field. It was where the *Australian Army Battalions* called home, from where they were transported by truck, or on top of *APCs – Armoured Personnel Carriers*- or in *Huey* choppers, and on foot, to patrol, ambush, and seek out the enemy. Intelligence gathering often came from *SAS* reports, or from *ARVN* sources or *American* surveillance.

The soldier on the ground was well equipped and well supported, and determined to make an impact when counted upon. The elements, tropical climate, heat and jungle terrain, often seemed to plot against him one moment, then provide a respite to laver at other times.

The one inescapable truth however, was this was a war with many twists. Civilians during the day, working their crops, watching, learning, as the soldier passed by, became a *Viet Cong* operative at night. It was a war

with no front line of attack and withdrawal. The enemy was like the terrain, all around. To take the fight to the enemy was to develop into a force willing to patrol and seek out the enemy by day, then set up ambush positions along suspected enemy trails by night.

Sometimes this was done at platoon strength of about 30 soldiers, and at other times by a section of 11 men. Still toward the end of the war, it was not uncommon for 6 man parties to leave *Nui Dat* on foot at dusk, and set up an ambush position about 1000 or so metres from the task force base.

Such was the impact of these tactics, that the *Viet Cong* became very insecure, even curtailing their night time raids against established strongholds of *Australian* and *South Vietnamese* forces. When called upon to opionate on the Australians actions, many former enemy would indicate their dread of meeting the Australians in the field of battle.

There were many instances of contact with the enemy by the Australian Army. Many that will go unrecorded here, and left to other volumes by other authors. There are too, the many instances of death and injury caused by mines to Australian troops. However, again, the purpose of this paper is to provide a solid groundwork for understanding the Vietnam War as it unfolded, and its effects on a generation.

Reflection on some of the more influential battles will provide an insight into the mind set of both the generals in command, the troops on the ground, and the enemy as it deployed. The next chapter should provide a deeper understanding of the soldier of the day.

## **11. The major battles**

As mentioned before, war by its very nature dictates the need for troops on the ground to, in the end, engage and overcome the enemy. So it is paramount that these ground troops be deployed in sufficient numbers, and with ground support, to successfully complete its task. There is much debate over whether IATF was given such resources.

Each year of Australia's involvement seemed to bring with it at least one or two major confrontations that would become known to Australians as '*battles*'. While the battle details that follow are brief, it should be remembered that readers are encouraged to seek further, more descriptive, research material available throughout the internet and unit histories.

Probably the best known and publicised of these was '*The Battle of Long Tan*'. However, as we shall read, it was not the only major battle of the war nor even the largest.

May 1966 saw elements of *1RAR* and *5RAR* deploy with the Americans *173rd Airborne Company*, to secure and set up a Task Force Base at *Nui Dat* near to the center of the province and alongside a major road route (2), that ran from *Vung Tau*, via *Ba Ria*, in the south, north into *Long Khan* Province.

By early June the task force base, *IATF*, was complete with *Artillery* emplacements, *Armoured Corps* with their tanks and APCs', *SAS Squadron* manning the highest point, at what would become known simply as



*SAS Hill*, and sundry units like *Signals Corps* and *Task Force Headquarters (HQ)*. *5 RAR* arrived in –country during May 1966, and *1 RAR* completed its first ‘tour-of-duty’ in June 1966, to be replaced by *6 RAR*.

The 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Battalions of the Regiment, each with four rifle companies and a support and administration company as well as their own HQ, took up positions occupying perimeter areas along the base’s extended boundaries. , Exclusion zones were cleared for added security in approaches to the base. This required the relocation of some villages including *Long Tan*, a known *Viet Cong* hotspot.

Meanwhile, in response to the threat posed by *1 ATF* a force of between 1,500 and 2,500 men from the *Viet Cong 275th Regiment*, possibly reinforced by at least one North Vietnamese battalion, and *D445 Provincial Mobile Battalion*, was ordered to move against *Nui Dat*. On the nights of 16 and 17 August 1966, *Viet Cong* mortars and recoilless rifles (RCLs) bombarded *Nui Dat* from a position 2 kilometres (1.2 mi) to its east, damaging the base and wounding 24. The *Viet Cong* positions were then engaged by counter-battery fire and the mortaring ceased.

### **THE BATTLE OF LONG TAN**

Australian radio signalers had tracked *275 Viet Cong Regiment* transmissions as they moved west to a position just north of the old *Long Tan* village site, but earlier patrols by the Australians had failed to locate the *Viet Cong* unit. On the morning of 18<sup>th</sup> August 1966, *B Company, 6th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (6 RAR)* departed *Nui Dat* to locate the firing points and the direction of the *Viet Cong* withdrawal. A number of weapon pits were subsequently found, as were the positions of the mortars and RCLs.

At around midday *D Company 6RAR* took over from *B Company* and began an active pursuit of a *Viet Cong* squad that had withdrawn in the late afternoon. One of *D Company*’s platoons was then engaged by small-arms and rocket-propelled grenade fire.. Numbering only 108 men, *D Company* was facing a much larger force. Pinned down, they called for artillery support as a monsoon rain began, reducing visibility.

Heavy fighting ensued as the attacking battalions of the *Viet Cong 275th Regiment* attempted to encircle and destroy the Australians. After several hours *D Company* was nearly out of ammunition, when 2 ‘*Hueys*’ from *No. 9 Squadron RAAF* arrived overhead to resupply them. Heavily outnumbered but supported by very close, accurate, artillery fire, *D Company* held off a regimental assault before a relief force of *APCs* from *3Troop IAPC Squadron*, carrying Infantry from *A Company 6RAR* fought their way through as darkness fell and forced the *Viet Cong* to withdraw just as they appeared to be preparing for a final assault. Withdrawing to establish a landing zone to evacuate their casualties, the Australians formed a defensive position overnight.

The Australian forces returned to the battle site, in strength, the next day, and located a large number of *Viet Cong* dead. Although believing they had suffered a major defeat, as the scale of the *Viet Cong*'s losses were revealed, the Australians realised they had actually won a major victory. *D Company 6RAR* lost 17 killed, and 1 more Australian from *IAPC Squadron* was also killed, and 24 were wounded.

The *Viet Cong* lost at least 245 dead, with blood trails left as dead and wounded were carried away by the enemy. A decisive Australian victory, *Long Tan* proved a major local setback for the *Viet Cong*, indefinitely forestalling any further movement against *Nui Dat*. Although there were other large-scale encounters in later years, *1 ATF* was not fundamentally challenged again. The battle established the task force's dominance over the province, and allowed it to pursue operations to restore government authority. A *Presidential Unit Citation*, from the *USA*, was awarded to the men of *D Company 6RAR*.

What should not be forgotten is the continual close in and accurate bombardment of the enemy, throughout the battle, by *American, New Zealand* and *Australian Artillery*, nor the heroism of the *RAAF* crew that flew in the ammunition re-supply in weather that would normally have grounded them.



By April 1967 5 RAR was replaced by 7 RAR, and 2 RAR with a *New Zealand* contingent of *Infantry* and *Artillery*, forming 2RAR/NZ, arrived in April and May of 1967 to bring 1 ATF to one of its fullest capacities of the ten year war, with 3 battalions and sundry other units.



## THE BATTLE OF SUOI CHAU PHA

Nearly one year after the *Battle of Long Tan* and after operations that saw *Australian* troops undertaking counter-insurgent strategies, with regular patrols and ambushes along known enemy supply routes, it had become more and more apparent that the *Viet Cong* and larger force *NVA* units had ceased to exist in large operational units in *Phouc Tuy Province*.

However, it was more likely that the *Viet Cong* and *NVA* regiments had decided to recuperate from their losses and entered into a period of re-supply, retraining, and recruitment, keeping as much as possible away from the patrolling *Australians* and their operations.

So it was that on 5 August 1967, during a search and destroy operation north west of *Nui Dat* in the *Hat Dich* area, A company 7 RAR, after being inserted into their *Landing Zone* undetected, surprised a forward sentry outpost of the 3<sup>rd</sup> *Battalion*, 274 *Regiment*. The next day, patrolling aggressively, A *Company* encountered a much larger force of reinforced company sized unit of the same *Viet Cong* regiment. Thus began a full on encounter battle in dense jungle through driving monsoonal rain, with neither side gaining any real advantage.

Over several hours each side battled to outflank one another, at times the opposing forward platoons came face to face with each other trying to achieve the same objective. With casualties mounting *Artillery* was called upon with *Australia* gaining the upper hand, when, just as the *Viet Cong* massed and stood to charge at the *Australian* troops, a barrage of artillery, called in to within 50 meters of the *Australian* forward troops, blasted the *Viet Cong* with such devastation that they began a fierce tactical withdrawal repeatedly firing back at the *Australian* positions as they melted back into the jungle.

In total, the *RAA 106th Field Battery* and the supporting *American* battery of the *US 2/35th Artillery Battalion* fired 1,026 rounds in support of *A Company* during the fighting, while *American 8-inch* and *175 mm* heavy artillery fired another 156 rounds. A number of airstrikes had also supported the Australians. *Australian* casualties included 6 killed and 20 wounded, while estimates put the enemy losses with 7 confirmed dead, as many as 33 likely killed by artillery and possibly 100 to 200 wounded.

Captured enemy documents over the next days confirmed that *A Company 7 RAR* had uncovered a major base camp of *274 Regiment Main Force Viet Cong*, with the company they faced, *C12 Company 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion*, probably sacrificed to allow the main force to withdraw and evade the Americans and Australian troops still patrolling over the next week or two. The action saw 8 Australian soldiers and 4 *9 Squadron RAAF* aircrew receive gallantry awards, the latter for their part in evacuating the wounded under heavy enemy ground fire, through exploding artillery shells in monsoonal rains.

## ***THE TET OFFENSIVE***

For the new year in 1968, and coinciding with the Vietnamese ‘*TET*’ festivities, *Ho Chi Minh* ordered a general uprising in the south by all his forces. Some will say *Minh* wanted to influence the talks about to get under way at the *Paris Peace Talks*, and *Geneva Convention*. Others argue that he wanted to fuel the growing protest against the war in the US and other allied countries..

Whatever reasoning, it brought about large scale, extended, aggressive attacks by his forces more accustomed to ambushing then melting away in the jungles or tunnels. The ‘*Tet Offensive*’, as it became known lasted about 25 days in January and February of 1968, and cost *Ho Chi Minh* about 45,000 of his troops without producing the hoped for general uprising of the populace., The *South Vietnam Army* and its allies suffered about 6,000 losses.

With Australia holding sway in *Phuoc Tuy Province*, through its campaign of counter insurgency, and large scale ‘*Search and Destroy*’ operations. *IATF* became available for deployment further afield during 1967 into 1968, and with more and more of *Phuoc Tuy Province* coming under control, several operations took the Australians into other provinces.

*2RAR* and *7RAR*, along with supporting arms, were deployed to *Bien Hoa Province*, to cover the north-eastern approaches to the *Long Binh–Bien Hoa* air base complex. In the days leading up to the offensive, the Australians fought a series of patrol clashes with the enemy. Fighting intensified during February when an Australian-manned base, *Fire Support Base Andersen*, came under repeated ground assault. *3RAR* also took part in the operation as *Andersen* was successfully defended.

In February 1968, *A Company 3RAR* with a troop of 3 *APCs* fought a savage 24 hour battle to clear the province capital of *Ba Ria* of *Viet Cong Main Force* soldiers. Later *3RAR* thwarted an attack on *Long Dien*, and after sweeping the village town of *Hoa Long* accounted for 50 dead and 25 wounded *Viet Cong*, losing 5 of its soldiers killed and a further 24 wounded.

Australian troops withdrew back to *Nui Dat* while battalions *1RAR* and *7RAR* exchanged tours with the latter heading back to Australia in April of 1968. Likewise forward parties of *2RAR/NZ* and *4RAR/NZ* were getting ready to exchange deployments for later in June 1968.

## ***THE BATTLES OF FIRE SUPPORT BASES CORAL AND BALMORAL***

Another attempt to disrupt the *South Vietnamese*, inflict as much damage as possible and to influence the *Paris Peace Talks*, was undertaken by the *North Vietnamese Army* in early May of 1968. This time all efforts seemed centered around *Saigon* and it took a savage pounding as the *South Vietnamese* and *Americans* fought pitched battles to force the *North Vietnamese* to withdraw.

To obstruct the withdrawal of the *North Vietnamese 141 Regiment*, Australia deployed two Battalions into *Binh Duong Province* near *Lai Khe*, to establish a Fire Support Base named Coral, - *FSB Coral*. However, the base was only partially completed by the evening of 12 May when it came under heavy bombardment in the early hours of the 13<sup>th</sup> May. Exploiting pre-dawn gloom and disorganised defences, the *North Vietnamese 141 Regiment*, attacking in battalion strength, temporarily captured a forward gun position during savage close quarter fighting. Later that same morning, however, the assaults were repulsed, and the Australians reclaimed their forward gun position.



*Australian troops defending FSB Coral, May 1968*

It must be included here that with *IRAR* mainly out on patrol during this first attack, it was the troops from *102 field battery*, *Royal Australian Artillery –RAA -*, with their machine gunners, and a *Mortar Platoon* from *IRAR*, who took the brunt of the first assault of about 250 to 300 enemy. A *New Zealand battery*, *161 Bty RNZA*, also joined in from a kilometer away, and helicopter gunships arrived to blast the enemy away from the ground troops.

The following day, *IRAR* was deployed to defend *FSB Coral*, while *3RAR* established another Fire support Base – *FSB Coogee* – to the west of Coral, in order to ambush along intelligence reported enemy infiltration routes and staging areas. On 16<sup>th</sup> May *FSB Coral* was again besieged by heavy bombardment and another battalion sized assault by the *North Vietnamese*. Again the defensive perimeter was momentarily penetrated, but after a six hour battle, by *Artillery* and *IRAR* troops, *141 Regiment NVA* was forced to withdraw after suffering heavy losses. Expecting further attacks Australia reinforced the base with *Centurion Tanks* and additional artillery.

On 22 May 1968 *FSB Coral* was again attacked with a short but accurate mortar barrage, terminated by Australian artillery and mortar counter-bombardment. On 25<sup>th</sup> May the Australians at *Coral* assaulted a number of bunkers that had been located just outside the base, with *Centurion Tanks* supported by infantry destroying the bunkers and their occupants without loss.

*3RAR* was then redeployed to establish another Fire Support Base – *FSB Balmoral* – on 24<sup>th</sup> May, to disrupt the *NVA* forces along *route 16* about 3 miles, (4 km), north of *FSB Coral*. Supported by tanks which had just arrived from *FSB Coral*, *3RAR* and *Artillery* troops were confronted with a two-battalion assault by the *165 Regiment* of *North Vietnam Army – 165R NVA -*, on 26 May. Just as before, the base was bombarded with heavy mortar and rocket fire, *D Company 3RAR* took the main brunt of the assault, but superior firepower from the *Centurion Tanks* and the *Infantry* soldiers, repelled the *NVA*.

The *North Vietnamese* attacked *FSB Balmoral* on 28<sup>th</sup> May, again in regimental strength, but was called off after only 30 minutes, being soundly defeated by the supporting fire of the tanks, artillery and mortars. The Australians then continued the fight to the enemy with aggressive patrolling and ambushing, in the following

days, until relieved by *American* and *South Vietnamese* forces on 6 June, when the Australians returned to *Nui Dat*

The battles at *FSBs Coral* and *Balmoral* saw the first time the Australians had clashed with regular *North Vietnamese Army* units operating in regimental strength in conventional warfare. During 26 days of fighting the *NVA* sustained heavy losses and were forced to postpone a further attack on *Saigon*. While *1 ATF* also suffered significant casualties, in the largest unit-level action of the war, the battles are considered one of the most famous actions fought by the Australian Army during the Vietnam War.

For the record, over the course of the 26 days, Australian losses included 25 killed in action and 99 wounded. The *NVA* and *Viet Cong* losses, although much hidden by the enemy's practice of dragging their dead, and wounded, from the battlefield, have been estimated as 267 dead and 7 wounded.

## **THE BATTLE OF BINH BA**

In early June 1969 an Australian force took part in one of the rarest actions seen by *Australians* in *Vietnam*; house to house close quarter fighting, to clear a village of *Viet Cong* and *NVA* regulars. In an attempt to influence ongoing peace talks, a combined force including a company from the *33 NVA Regiment*, elements of the *Viet Cong D440 Provincial Mobile Battalion*, and squads from local guerrilla units, occupied *Binh Ba* on the evening of 5<sup>th</sup> June 1969.

In response, South Vietnamese *ARVN* forces were sent from *Duc Thanh* the following morning. Initial



*Bell UH-1 'Huey' Gunship used in Vietnam*

intelligence suggested that a group of about platoon strength had infiltrated the village. However the *South Vietnamese* soon discovered they were facing a larger force, and their district commander subsequently asked *IATF* for assistance in clearing *Binh Ba*.

An understrength (65 men) unit of *D Company 5RAR* was deployed to the village with *Centurion Tanks* and *APCs*, to set about getting the civilians (about 3,000), safely out of harm's way. However, they came under a volley of fire and *RPG* rounds – *Rocket Propelled Grenades* – and soon realised that the enemy was a much larger force than at first reported. As well, *helicopter gunships* heading in to support the ground troops, reported another large force of about 60 *Viet Cong*

heading for the village. In total, probably about a battalion strength force was either ensconced in the brick houses among the villagers, or heading toward the village to support those already there.

*D Company* was joined by *B Company* in the early afternoon, along with more tanks and *APCs*, *105 Field Battery Artillery*, and *RAAF Gunships* in support. They began their house to house searches, clearing civilians to the rear of the action, and carefully searching the small air-raid bunkers attached to nearly all the houses. Each time the Infantry came under fire from a house, it was blasted with a tank round then the Infantry moved in to clear the enemy from the rubble, if anyone had survived the initial bombardment.

Harbouring up in defensive positions overnight, the clearance of *Binh Ba* continued throughout the next day, with most of the enemy forces fleeing toward another village, *Duc Trung*, where *ARVN* forces again required the assistance of the Australians to clear that hamlet. By the end of the fourth day most of *Binh Ba* lay in ruin, but the enemy had withdrawn, leaving behind 107 dead, 8 captured and 6 wounded, for the death of 1 Australian and 10 wounded.

## THE BATTLE OF LONG KHAN

The Australian government began reducing troops at the end of 1970 leaving 2 battalions at 1 ATF Nui Dat, along with substantial support of armour, artillery and RAAF air support. By the end of 1970 Phuoc Tuy province was almost free of NVA and Viet Cong large scale movements, and a lot of the security of the provincial towns was left to the South Vietnamese ARVN troops to administer.

With 8RAR going home and not replaced, 3RAR arrived for its second tour to join 7RAR who were also in the process of returning to Australia, and 4RAR/NZ, with a contingent of a Company from New Zealand, arrived in March 1971 as the last elements of 7RAR left. Thus Phuoc Tuy province became the responsibility of just 2 battalions for the remainder of the war.

Patrolling by Australian Special Air Service, (SAS), in the north of Phuoc Tuy province, near the border with Long Khan province, began to show signs of the presence of large numbers the Viet Cong D445 Regiment in the vicinity of the Courtenay rubber plantation. Indeed, when given permission to extend patrolling 4 kilometres into Long Khan province, intelligence gathering found D445 and the 33 NVA regiment were attempting to disrupt local security, using the area to refit and retrain.



Centurion Tank and APC with 3 RAR 1971

*Operation Overlord* was put into effect with some trepidation among the lower ranks realising the name, landing zones, and date of commencement, being the same as those used during the WW2 Normandy D-Day landings, might telegraph Australia's intentions. However, the operation was launched on 6 June 1971 with 3 RAR and C Squadron Centurion Tanks given the task of driving the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese into a blocking combination of 4 RAR/NZ, A Squadron 3 Cav Regiment, and 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion 3<sup>rd</sup> US Cavalry Regiment.

The A battery and 104 Field Battery Artillery had deployed to Fire Support Bases prior to 3 RARs insertion by air of A, B and C Companies, and D

company in reserve. No sooner had they landed in the APC secured Landing Zone - LZ - A Company came under direct intense fire. B Company landed about 1,000 metres into their designated landing zone and also took firing from nearly in front of A Company's position. The firing eased after a short while allowing the remainder of the 3 RAR force to land.

Aggressive patrolling and company sized sweep of the area led to the discovery that 3 RAR had been dropped to within 500 metres of a major enemy bunker system. It became apparent that there was a strong presence of a large Viet Cong and NVA troops moving away from 3 RAR, and a few contacts had been reported by the blocking forces. The enemy appeared to be avoiding open combat with the Australians.

The main enemy position had been identified by nightfall on the 6 June, and at dawn on the 7<sup>th</sup> a heavy Artillery bombardment began for almost an hour. 5 Platoon, B Company (3 RAR), began to advance but had only gone 100 metres when it was pinned down by volleys of firing from its front and both flanks. They had stumbled onto the edge of well concealed and strongly defended bunkers, and called in helicopter gunships rather than run the risk of receiving more casualties by withdrawing.

With the rest of B Company trying to link up with its beleaguered 5 Platoon, D Company with Tanks and APCs began an assault to what was thought to be the rear and flank of the bunker system. However, they began

to realise that the system was much larger than anyone expected, and the tanks were forced to halt while the infantry troops were brought up to begin an assault.

By mid-afternoon *B Company* had stabilised its position with 5 *Platoon* survivors, and *D Company* had been repositioned to commence another assault. Pushing through the dense jungle from the north-east with *Centurion Tanks* in close support, it was slow going with each bunker at first located by the troops then crushed by the tanks, along with any occupants. *D Company* painstakingly searched each bunker systematically, and it was later found that the area of bunkers covered almost a square kilometer. During this final assault, *C Company*, which had been deployed to the south located and captured a second bunker system that had been hastily abandoned with weapons and ammunition left behind by the fleeing *Viet Cong*.

*Australia* lost 3 killed and six wounded. Although official records show that only 5 bodies of *Viet Cong* and *NVA* regulars were recovered, it is believed that many more lay in the crushed bunkers. *American Pioneers* and *Australian Engineers* later demolished both bunker sites, depriving the *Viet Cong* of a major resource.



## ***THE BATTLE OF NUI LE***

*Australia's* commitment in Vietnam had been winding down since 8 *RAR* headed home and no replacement was made, in November 1970. 7 *RAR* completed their second tour in March 1971, and 3 *RAR* had arrived in February 1971 to secure the withdrawal of 2 *RAR/NZ* after its second tour ended in May 1971, and the arrival of 4 *RAR/NZ* in April/May 1971.

3 *RAR* left for *Australia* in September 1971, leaving 4 *RAR/NZ* one of the last combatant troop units to administer a hand over to *ARVN* forces by the end of 1971, in *Phuoc Tuy* province. Ready and waiting, the *Viet Cong* and *NVA* forces began to make their presence felt trying to goad the weakened *Australians* into ambushes for one last attempt to gain a decisive victory over their foe.

On 19 September 1971 a *South Vietnamese Regional Force* at *Cam My* village, in the north of *Phuoc Tuy* province near *Route 2*, came under a rocket and mortar attack. When *Australian APCs* went to investigate and relieve the *South Vietnamese*, they came under small arms fire and *RPG* rounds from a suspected *NVA* force.

The next day 11 *Platoon D Company 4 RAR/NZ* made contact with an *NVA* platoon and after a short firefight they discovered 4 dead *NVA* soldiers, and tracks found nearby indicated a large force of some 200

soldiers had passed through the area. They were recognised as *33<sup>rd</sup> Regiment NVA*, and suspecting ambushes the *Australian* relief forces skirted around likely ambush points and evaded further contact that day.

Patrols on 21 September led to the discovery of recently sawn logs in the vicinity of the *Courtenay Rubber* plantation suggesting that there may be bunkers nearby. *B and D Companys'* moved toward the *Nui Le* area to seek out and destroy the bunkers.

*12 Platoon, D Company 4 RAR/NZ* made first contact with a bunker system, suffering one dead from a rocket-propelled grenade and four wounded. An estimated platoon strength assault attacked *11 Platoon*, and after a 15-minute firefight the *North Vietnamese* forces withdrew to their bunkers after removing their dead and wounded from the battlefield. The *Australian* and *New Zealand* platoons were ordered to withdraw to an area to the south so airstrikes and artillery could be called in to soften up the bunker systems.

USAF bombers bombed the area with napalm and air to surface missiles. *Bell 'Huey'* and *Cobra* helicopter gunships strafed the area with rockets and machine guns, and *Australian Artillery* also poned the area. *D Company 4 RAR/NZ* was again ordered forward to search and destroy the bunker system. However, without the support of *Centurion Tanks*, which had been returned to Australia, all soldiers knew this was going to be fought the hard way, hand to hand.

They had gone some 50 metres when the *North Vietnamese* opened up with everything they had, and *11 Platoon* found themselves well inside the bunker complex with 3 killed and pinned down. Many of the grenades thrown by the *NVA* did not explode fortunately for the *Australians*. *12 Platoon* also soon found itself pinned down by machine gun and small arms fire, as it tried to support and join with *11 Platoon*.

The order was given to withdraw under supporting fire, but this could not be done safely until the sun was almost setting. Then just as it was getting dark the *Australians* encountered another *NVA* force. This time close in *Artillery* was called for just as more *NVA* forces could be seen joining the battle. After some 5 hours of close in fighting and *Artillery* bombardment the *North Vietnamese* withdrew almost as the *Australians* were running low on ammunition.

Later, the bunker system was found to be the *NVA 33<sup>rd</sup> Regimental* headquarters. *Australia* had lost 5 killed and 30 wounded. 14 enemy dead bodies were recovered. This proved to be the last major battle of the *Vietnam War* for *Australia*, and with the withdrawal of *4 RAR/NZ* in November 1971, only the *AATTV* was active until December 1972.

Although the paragraphs above reflect on seven of the major battles *Australia* fought during the *Vietnam War*, it must be remembered that other less reported battles and skirmishes of all units who went to war during this period fought with distinction, never losing a battle. In *Phuoc Tuy Province* the general populace, despite the occasional atrocity against smaller villages and their elders, could go about tending their farms and rice-paddies, almost oblivious to the war around them. Markets went ahead in larger towns, and major cities like *Vung Tau* saw civilians carrying on in normal business affairs.

## 12. Governments, Protestors, and Wars End

The *Vietnam War* was a complicated one and not open to purely military solutions. It was a war where politics, ideology and military warfare were woven into a single pattern. It was a war in which military commanders needed an understanding of political matters to make good decisions and where similarly, politicians needed an understanding of military matters to give effective direction.

The need for this dual understanding came from the nature of the war. There were many senior *US* and allied commanders, civilian and military, whose failure to understand the nature of the war resulted in tragic military mistakes, harmful political direction and dramatically wrong predictions of the progress of the war.

Couple these factors with changes to political parties, the ideology of the general public, in Australia over the ten year period of the war, then yes, most became disillusioned and lost the resolve to continue the support of the *South Vietnam* government. It could also be said, that for the most part, the *South Vietnamese* government could not win over the hearts and minds of its own people.

In *Australia* the *Menzies, Liberal*, government had been in power since *Robert Menzies* came to power in 1949. By the time he retired in 1966 he had introduced *Conscription* and sent *Australia* to war in *Vietnam*. In the *USA* *John F Kennedy* became *President* in 1961 until assassinated in 1963. He had seen the increase to *Advisors to Vietnam*, and his successor, *Lyndon Johnson* witnessed the escalation of the war until he reached the end of his term in 1969. His successor, *Richard Nixon*, vowed to 'bring our boys home'.

When *Menzies* retired in 1966 his successor, *Harold Holt*, declared 'all the way with *LBJ*', in reference to support of the *American President, Lyndon Baines Johnson*. *Gough Whitlam* took over as leader of the opposition, *Labor Party*, in *Canberra* amid a groundswell of rising opposition to the war in *Vietnam*. After *Harold Holt* mysteriously disappeared, feared drowned at the end of 1967, newly elected *Liberal* leader, *John Gorton*, took over as *Prime Minister* in January 1968.

Amid this time of political change, by attrition, there was also military change in higher echelons. Commanders were confronted with different direction. Troops on the ground were subjected to changes in the way operations were carried out. Civilians in *Australia* too, were changing. Youth cried out for change. Since the early 1960s the world was confronted with a music *Pop* culture, which saw the rise of the *Hippy* and *Flower Power* movement, intertwined with increasing protests against the war in *Vietnam*.

By mid 1971 both *America* and *Australia* began withdrawing troops from *South Vietnam*. In July 1971 the *Australian* government reduced *National Service* from 2 years to 18 months, but this had little effect on an electorate that wanted conscription stopped and all troops pulled out of *Vietnam*. *Gough Whitlam's Labor Party* was gaining momentum with its promise to do both at the next election due in late 1972. *John Gorton* quit as *Prime Minister* at the end of 1971, leaving *William McMahon* to take over the *Liberal Party* and lead it to the next elections.

Meanwhile, in *Phuoc Tuy* province, by the end of September 1971, *4 RAR/NZ* was the only battalion of *Australian* and *New Zealand* infantry troops remaining. Over the next few months *1 ATF* base *Nui Dat* was being partly handed over to *ARVN* forces and the rest dismantled. All units except *D Company 4 RAR/NZ*, which remained in the field patrolling the province, were redeployed to the *1<sup>st</sup> Australian Logistics Support Group* – *1ALSG* - encampment at *Vung Tau*. A troop of *APCs* from *3 Cav Regiment* remained with *4 RAR*.

Although some remnants of units remained in *Vung Tau* and *Saigon* until March 1972 and others, like the *Saigon Embassy Guards*, until June 1973, it is generally thought that Australian commitment ceased with the signing of the *Paris Peace Accord* on 23 January 1973. The *RAAF* returned for humanitarian evacuations in 1975, before the fall of *Saigon*.



The *Paris Peace Accord*, was intended to bring an end to war in *Vietnam*, but neither the North nor the South honoured the terms of the accord, and in March 1975 *North Vietnamese* forces began a concerted push south. Early victories by *NVA* forces led to a widespread loss of morale among the troops of the *ARVN*. The speed of the advance took all parties by surprise, and on 30 April, with *Saigon* occupied, the remnants of the *South Vietnamese* government unconditionally surrendered.

So ended the most prolonged war in *Australian* history. A war that divided the nation in so many different ways, at every level of society. As promised, *Gough Whitlam*, elected in December 1972, repealed the *National Service* legislation and conscription was ended. However, this seemingly final act of overseeing the last remnants of *Australian* forces pulled out of *Vietnam*, was really only the beginning of another chapter for the *veterans* who went to war in *South Vietnam*.



*Systematic spraying of toxic chemicals most commonly referred to as Agent Orange.*

An ominous sign was over the horizon. One that did not surface for many years after cessations of hostilities. Yet one that has affected nearly every service man and woman who went to fight in that war.

It is known among *Vietnam Veterans* as '*The Battle after the war*' – *The Aftermath* – and its name became a household phrase in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

**'AGENT ORANGE'.**

### **13. The fight goes on**

The *Vietnam Veteran* returning home found a bewildering set of circumstances confronting them. The government *Department of Veterans Affairs* – *DVA* -, set up to assist the returning veterans of *World War I*, and overseeing the plight of veterans from that time with legislated Acts of parliament to apply a duty of care toward veterans, appeared ever determined to thwart *Vietnam Veterans* of their rightful benefits.

Society shunned them, and in a peculiar turn-around, even the *Returned Services League of Australia* – *RSL* -, an association borne out of the need to look after veterans special needs, turned a blind eye when that call came from *Vietnam Veterans*. Many *conscripts* returning to their old jobs were told it was no longer available, in direct contradiction of the *National Service Act*, with companies ignoring their pleas and advising the Act no longer applied because it had been repealed.

There are many articles and publications that uncover the worst of treatment that befell the *Vietnam Veteran*, and why he found it necessary to band together in its own *association* in an effort to resolve the issues. The recommended study list follows as an addendum following this article. They include, among others, the fight for a Counselling Service for Vietnam Veterans to assist them to rejoin and repatriate estranged family due to the effects of *Post Traumatic Stress Disorder/s* – *PTSD* -, and the eventual setting up of the *Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service* – *VVCS* - administered by *DVA*.

Still, other measures were needed to change the mindset of the *DVA*. *Vietnam Veterans* as a body, lobbied local and federal members of parliament, continually berating the methodology being used by the *DVA*. With the assistance of sympathetic lawyers and barristers at the *Administrative Appeals Tribunal* – *AAT* -, *Vietnam Veterans* won case after case against the government, proving time and again, that *DVA* staffers were applying the wrong interpretation of the *Veterans Entitlement Act* – *VEA* -, as applied to veterans.

Most sinister of all was the revelation that our troops in Vietnam had been exposed to toxic herbicides (generically known as Agent Orange) sprayed from the air and on the ground, the most dangerous of which degraded only very slowly, infecting the soil and the waterways, and accumulating in seafood.

In the late 70s veterans banded together to demand to know to what they had been exposed and what that might mean for them and their children.. Good evidence existed that such exposure might cause cancer in veterans and abnormalities in their children, but *DVA*, despite Repatriation legislation demanding it give the ‘benefit of the doubt’ when assessing compensation claims, remained in denial..

The veterans successfully campaigned for a Royal Commission, which found that under Repatriation legislation, two categories of cancer could be linked with exposure. *DVA*, however, continued to deny the link.

Today, more than 50 years later, *Vietnam Veterans* are still taking the fight up to *DVA*, and proving by winning most cases contested, that the fight is well justified. Perhaps it was the training, or even the socio-mindset of the educated soldier sent to *South Vietnam*, that make us what we are and what we do today. Hopefully, our younger veteran comrades will continue forcefully reminding the government and *DVA* of its responsibility to care for those injured physically and psychologically by the trauma of fighting Australia’s wars.



**Addendum – recommended reading and further studies.**

*1. The truth behind the Australian Vietnam Veterans campaigns to gain rights as returned veterans and the need to combat those supposedly in place to assist us. Can be found on our national website:*

**[www.vvfa.org.au/fedstory.pdf](http://www.vvfa.org.au/fedstory.pdf)**

*2. The full story about our fight to have the effects of ‘Agent Orange’ on Veterans and our offspring can be found on the national website:*

**[www.vvfa.org.au/AO The Official History.pdf](http://www.vvfa.org.au/AO%20The%20Official%20History.pdf)**



**Phill Thompson 1944-1986**



**Ray Fulton 1948-2008**



**Tim McCombe 1945-2015**

(Above) The founding fathers of the Vietnam Veterans Federation of Australia

### 3. Why 2 Vietnam Veterans organisations ?

#### ***The birth of the Federation....***

For several years between 1981 and 1989 there was an ill wind between the NSW Branch, the Victorian Branch and the National Executive of the VVAA. This was to come to a head when, after several attempts of mediation, the VVAA National Council refused to respond to questions put to a National Meeting, by the NSW President. Several more attempts were made, but without a proper response from the VVAA National Executive to some vital questions, the NSW Branch had to consider its position. With NSW having around half of the association's membership, it being the source of most of the associations documented arguments and with its interests and objectives being ignored, there seemed no choice.

Between 1979 and 1995 the NSW Branch had been at the forefront of most of the VVAA National Councils research and investigations on behalf of Vietnam Veterans. The fight to prove 'Agent Orange' affected not only those returning from Vietnam, but our offspring as well, is well documented on the VVFA (National) website. ( <http://www.vvfa.org.au> ).

Separate campaigns that saw VVCS offices created and Operation Life Programs established, (supported by all ESOs), flourished in the 1980s and 1990s. NSW successfully mounted AAT Hearings and High Court rulings that proved time and again that the DVA was deliberately denying veterans their just rights under the law. That they be given the benefit of all doubt when making claims.

In February 1995 at a general meeting, the NSW Branch chose to disassociate itself from the National Council of the VVAA. At a further meeting in July of 1995 interstate organisations also agreed to join with NSW and form a new national body calling itself the Vietnam Veterans Federation of Australia, (VVFA). South Australia, the ACT and Queensland, along with NSW became the founding member States. Between 1995 and 1981, with other States VVAA members becoming disenchanted, some of their number disaffiliated also and chose to join the Federation, so that by the end of 1982 we had increased State membership to include Victoria, Western Australia, and Tasmania.

#### ***Continuing the battles.....***

Amid the upheaval within our ranks, a split with The Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia, and the unfortunate demise of prominent people within our ranks, we still manage to pull together, without faltering, or losing sight of our objectives. The story of what we needed to do, to force recognition, just compensation, and a justified application of our rights as should be applied to all service men and women. It is the true essence of the tenacity that made up the soldier of the day. The Vietnam Veteran.

Our strength to lobby government officials on matters relative to the Veteran community, as well as those still serving, is considerable. With sittings at round-table discussions with the government of the day we have been able to successfully seek a new research and history into the effects of Agent Orange on Vietnam Veterans and their children. We have recently undertaken a raft of matters to government, including the closure of VAN offices, the threat against the VVCS, the attack on veteran pensioners, and the attempted reduction in soldiers superannuation, to name a few.

***The fight never ends.***

4. Books:

***The Minefield – An Australian Tragedy In Vietnam***

by **Greg Lockhart**

The best book so far written about Australia's participation in the Vietnam war.

And a chapter of one of the most awful decisions made during the war.

The laying of a minefield supposedly to stop Viet Cong infiltration.

Hard to find but well worth the effort, you should try to get your hands on a copy of:

***The Battle After the War – The Aftermath***

by **Ambrose Crowe**

The first book about the treatment that Australian Vietnam veterans received at the hands of the government and from the general public.

***Vietnam – The Complete Story of the Australian War***

by Bruce Davies and Gary McKay

Focuses on the challenges the Australians faced against not only a dogged enemy, but also those by the allies in their quest to defeat a powerful counterinsurgency.

***End.>***

***R Freshfield***

***The Vietnam War – An Australian Perspective***

***Final, December 2017.***