

Australia's Military Involvement in the Vietnam War

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Introduction

This posting is the first of two intended to provide an overview of Australian military operations in Vietnam, commencing from the deployment of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam in 1962 until 1969, when Australian forces began withdrawing, consistent with the Nixon Doctrine of phased withdrawal from the mainland of Asia and the policy of Vietnamization.

While the second will deal primarily with the political decisions to become involved in the Vietnam war, suffice to say for the moment, that the Australian commitment to Vietnam was largely dictated by political concerns and was therefore limited by the same concerns. The predominant theory of defence during the sixties was the containment of communism and "Forward Defence". Both of these policies relied heavily on the presence of America in Southeast Asia combating the perceived Chinese threat. In Vietnam, this translated into the policy of supporting American military involvement and encouraging the continuation of this involvement until such time as China was sufficiently dissuaded from any further adventurism or Australia could more capably defend itself.

Australian Army Training Team Vietnam

Australia's initial commitment to supporting the American stance in Vietnam consisted of the deployment of a team of military advisers. On 26th July, 1962, the Minister for Defence announced Australia's intention to send 30 instructors to the Republic of Vietnam, 4 going to the Military Aid Council Vietnam (MACV) Headquarters in Saigon, 22 to regional locations in the Hue area and 4 to Duc My.¹ This team would be headed by Colonel F.P. Serong, previously the Commanding Officer at the Jungle Training Centre, Canungra, Queensland and would fall under the command of the Australian Army Forces, Far Eastern Land Forces Headquarters in Singapore.² The AATTV arrived in the Republic of Viet Nam in August, 1962.

AATTV advisers served with ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) units, including infantry, artillery and armoured divisions, independent regiments in the I Corps area (the northern province of RVN), regional and provincial headquarters, the Viet Nam Police Field Force, US Special Forces, Montagnard Special Forces and CIA operations.³ With the escalation of Australian forces in Vietnam in 1966, Australian advisers also served with 1 Australian Task Force (1ATF) at Nui Dat.

The primary role of the AATTV was to train ARVN and other forces in the use of weapons, jungle warfare, tactics and strategy. In addition, especially after the Australian government allowed them to serve in battalion and smaller size formations, they took liaison roles, calling for airstrikes and arranging logistical support and medevac facilities⁴ They usually operated as individuals or in small groups of two or three. After 1963, the AATTV came under the operational control of MACV HQ in Saigon.

It was intended that the AATTV would represent Australia's commitment to the American operations in Vietnam, and as such, would not have a significant military impact, however, the success of Australian advisers, not the least Captain Peterson's training of the Montagnard Special Forces in Dar Lac Province, became quickly known throughout Vietnam. Peterson established Armed Propaganda and Intelligence Teams (APIT) from amongst Montagnard tribesmen in Ban Me Thout, designed to disseminate propaganda, collect information and establish a network of informers, disrupt Viet Cong infiltration and supply routes, conduct small scale raids, ambushes and similar minor operations and to conduct long range patrols into Viet Cong 'safe areas', rescuing captured Montagnards and liberating equipment and ammunition.⁵ Building on these gains, Peterson established a 'People's Army' just prior to his departure, which at that stage had effectively regained control over much of southern Dar Lac. Despite the inadequacies of the ARVN forces in protecting pacified areas, and the racial problems between Montagnards and ARVN personnel, Peterson had succeeded in regaining the upper hand in the Ban Me Thout region.

AATTV techniques and method of operations were significantly different to many of those employed by their American allies. Experience in the jungles of Malaya and Borneo and limitations on the number of and facilities available to personnel had combined to produce very different tactics. Whilst American instructors expounded the virtues of the rapid deployment of large numbers of troops, massive fire power and decisive battles, Australians concentrated on individual marksmanship, the independence of platoons from battalion HQs, small scale patrols and ambushes. These differences frequently brought Australian advisers into conflict with their American superiors. The Australian policy of 'economy of effort' was directly opposed to the American idea of 'concentration of force'.⁶

The AATTV served with distinction in Vietnam. During AATTV's tour of duty, members were awarded two [sic] Victoria Crosses, several Military Crosses and several Military Medals.⁷ It was the first Australian force to arrive and the last to leave. After the initial deployment of 30 instructors, it was increased in size by 30 in May 64, by 23 in June 64 and then by 17 in January 65, bringing it to a total strength of 100. It was restricted from further increases by the introduction of a National Service Act (1965) in Australia which required large numbers of instructors. The last instructors were withdrawn from Phuoc Tuy Province in December 1972.

The First Deployment of Australian Ground Forces

In April 1965, consistent with President Johnson's deployment of US Marines to protect airforce bases in Vietnam, Prime Minister Robert Menzies announced his intention to send 1 Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (1 RAR) to assist in the defence of American bases. 1 RAR was restructured into a tropic warfare organisation, similar to that employed by the American army and was to serve under the US 173rd Airborne Brigade (Separate) (US 173 Abn Bde) defending Bien Hoa airforce base.⁸ Initially it was intended that 1 RAR would only be used in defence of the base but by December offensive operations had begun in conjunction with 173 Abn Bde.⁹ During 1 RAR's tour of duty, 22 major operations were conducted, usually within 10-20 miles from Bien Hoa.

Like the AATTV, significant problems were encountered in operating with US forces. These were compounded by poor equipment, including WWII Owen machine guns and boots, and no decent preparation before embarkation.¹⁰ The operational problems they encountered will be discussed below, suffice to say here that they were not sufficiently resolved until 1 ATF was established with its relative independence. Despite these limitations, however, the Australian regiment was successfully integrated into the 173rd Abn Bde until its tour of duty was completed in June 1966.

1 Australian Task Force, Phuoc Tuy Province

In March 1966, the Australian government announced its intention to create a single and relatively independent Australian Task Force. This came largely as a result of political pressure on the Australian government by Washington but was also consistent with the dominant foreign and defence policy trends within Canberra at the time. However, there was good reason to create the Task Force from a military point of view also. Not only would Australians regain some control over their troops, they would also be permitted to conduct operations in a manner consistent with their experiences and techniques. Consideration was also given to the limited resources available to the Australian command in Vietnam and the need to pool these in order to have a more visible effect.

Phuoc Tuy Province was situated in III Corps Tactical Zone and had a population of 160,000. At the time the Australian Task Force arrived, it was a relatively wealthy province, agriculturally rich and had a comparatively prosperous coastal economy.¹¹ It had been a base for anti-French activities after WWII and was familiar with the Viet Minh presence that accompanied these activities. Despite having two large Catholic migrant towns, it was also a popular base for Viet Cong activities throughout the period of Diem's authority.¹² Operational in Phuoc Tuy were the 274th and 275th NLF Regiments and D445 Provincial Mobile Battalion, a local force with strong links to the population, an intimate knowledge of the area and assured supplies¹³

Phuoc Tuy was chosen because there was a reasonable amount of enemy activity, no risk of border violations in the pursuit of the enemy and it had excellent air and sea access ensuring adequate supplies and an assured evacuation route. The terrain was not dissimilar from that often encountered by Australians in Malaya and Borneo.¹⁴ In addition to this, the pacification of Phuoc Tuy was essential to the Republic of Viet Nam because of its wealth and to the MACV because of the significance of Vung Tau port and the supply line (Route 15) to Saigon and Bien Hoa.

The exact placement of the Task Force was to be Nui Dat, a hill on Route 2, heading north through the centre of the province, and was an obvious challenge to the NLF and NVA forces in the area. The Logistics and Supply Group (1 ALSG) was to be situated in Vung Tau where it had good access to American supply groups and where it was hoped that it would be somewhat safer from large scale attack.¹⁵

The Task Force was to be comprised of 2 infantry battalions (5/6 RAR were the first to serve in 1ATF), artillery (including some New Zealand elements), engineers, signals and administrative support, under the command of Brigadier O.D. Jackson. 1 ALSG, situated in Vung Tau, consisted of 176 Air Dispatch Company, 2 Field Ambulance, 33 Dental Unit, 2 Composite Ordnance Depot and the 101 Field Workshop of Royal Australian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers.¹⁶ Since August 1964, No.35 Transport Squadron RAAF had been situated at Vung Tau and one year after the arrival of 1 ALSG, (June 1966) No.9 Helicopter Squadron was also situated in Phuoc Tuy.¹⁷

1 ATF's objectives in Phuoc Tuy were never very clear. Because it came under the operational command of US II Field Forces Vietnam (II FFV) but under the National command of Headquarters Australian Forces Vietnam, the Commander 1 ATF had to reconcile sometimes inconsistent objectives. Westmoreland told Jackson to "take over Phuoc Tuy"¹⁸ this representing the sum of operational commands to 1 ATF whilst from COMAFV, directions were only a little more specific. The aims of 1 ATF were defined as the security and domination of 1 ATF's assigned area, the security of Route 15, the conduct of other operations as required, conduct operations anywhere in II Corps Tactical Zone and in Bin Thuan Province, II Corps Tactical Zone,

as required and agreed up on by COMAFV.¹⁹ The actual practicality of these aims was hard to assess but it seems that this meant 1 ATF was to act in both a pacification role as well as a large unit to counter main force activity. COIN operations would require frequent contact and close coordination with ARVN forces and the civilian administration, yet the advisory positions in ARVN and the administration were dominated by Americans. Alternatively, large scale operations against main force units required more manpower, mobility and fire support and could not adequately be completed by two battalions, one of which would be required for base security at all times.²⁰

This obscurity when it came to the nature of operations 1 ATF was to engage in did provide the Commander with some degree of operational freedom. It was not long before the Australian forces had applied their own style of operation. The base at Nui Dat, whilst its presence was readily felt in the area, was not cleared as were American bases and few ARVN personnel and no indigenous Vietnamese were allowed in to the base. This meant that troop strength at any one time was hard to gauge and security was excellent.²¹

It was D Company of 6 RAR that first encountered the enemy in strength at Long Tan on the 18th August, 1966. In engaging and severely damaging D445 Regiment, 1 ATF had established a moral and later physical victory over the NLF in Phuoc Tuy. The TET offensive of February 1968 also contributed to the relative demise of the VC 5th Division (274 and 275 Regiments) in the region, due to the heavy casualties they took. In order to combat the decreasing strengths of the pre-existing NLF forces in the province D440 was created in 1967, however, this too proved relatively ineffective, not being a local force so much as comprising large numbers of NVA personnel.²²

In November 1967, 1 ATF was increased in size by an extra battalion (including of NZ artillery) and was reinforced by a squadron of Centurion tanks. This was largely in response to the deteriorating military situation in Vietnam and the possibility of a TET offensive. General Vincent (COMAFV, Jan. 67 to Jan. 68) was enthusiastic to increase Australian forces either to enable them to take responsibility for all of Phuoc Tuy or alternatively to allow 1 ATF to operate more tangibly outside Phuoc Tuy Province.²³ As a result, in January 1968, 1 ATF was ordered to occupy an area 12 km north of Bien Hoa airforce base with a view to preventing any expected TET assault. 1 ATF successfully engaged and defeated the enemy in February (as it did an offensive in Baria at the same time) and returned to Nui Dat. It was again called on to help defend Bien Hoa in May.²⁴

If Vincent was enthusiastic about Australia's role in the war, then McDonald, his successor, was passionate. McDonald was keen not to see Australian operations limited to "[saving] the odd house from being burned to the ground" in Phuoc Tuy. In gaining U S support for operations against the VC in the Long Hai Hills in March 1968, McDonald believed the US was attempting to hasten Australia's victory over the enemy in Phuoc Tuy so as to get 1 ATF operational in areas of more strategic importance.²⁵

By 1969 and the beginning of the US withdrawal from South Vietnam, II FFV had re-prioritized its aims and instructed the then COMAEV, General Hay, that 1 ATF should do likewise. First priority was to be given to pacification, second to upgrading ARVN forces and thirdly to military operations. Pacification operations began in May 1969 however, hampered by unenthusiastic ARVN forces, they proceeded slowly. The success of the ATF in forcing the withdrawal of NLF mainforce units and the provincial battalions (the remnants of D445 and the newer but understrength D440) was countered by the maintenance of the VC infrastructure in the villages.²⁶ Thus, as the Task Force withdrew in December 1971, the remaining AATTV members presided over the gradual return of NLF in Phuoc Tuy.

The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) and Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) in Vietnam

As part of the policy of encouraging American involvement in Vietnam, and as a result of his convincing victory at the polls in November 1966, Menzies decided to increase Australia's military commitment to Vietnam to include elements of all three services. The commissioning of two Charles F. Adams guided missile destroyers in 1965 and the impending replacement of Canberra bombers by F-111s had made available to COMAFV additional sources for Australian expansion in Vietnam.²⁷

RAAF:

Since August 1964, elements of No.35 Squadron (Transport) consisting of fixed wing Caribous, had been stationed at Vung Tau in order to assist in the movement and supply of 1 RAR. With the establishment of 1ATF and 1 ALSG in June 1966, No.9 Squadron (Helicopters) were deployed to provide logistic support, troop movement and medevac facilities for the Task Force. Both of these commitments were relatively insignificant except in so far as they represent a desire to have Australians supporting Australians in Phuoc Tuy. Both units served as essential support for 1 ATF but added little to the ongoing American involvement.

Perhaps one of the most significant RAAF contributions to the Vietnam war was the deployment of No.2 Squadron (Canberra Bombers) to Phan Rang in April 1967. The Australian 5th Airfield Construction Squadron had completed the provision of Australian facilities by the time the first eight of ten bombers arrived. The bombers were to undergo usual maintenance in Phan Rang but had additional facilities at Butterworth, in Malaysia for major maintenance.²⁸ The entire contingent consisted of approximately 300 men and came under the command of USAF 35th Tactical Fighter Wing.²⁹

At the height of Australia's military involvement in Vietnam, RAAF personnel numbered around 800 people from three squadrons. The Canberra Bomber squadron was the first summoned home in March 1971 followed by the remaining RAAF personnel in August.

RAN:

The Royal Australian Navy's contingent to the Vietnam war was somewhat more substantial. The first RAN personnel to see action were the six members of Clearance Diving Team 3. CDT 3 was initially part of the Inshore Undersea Warfare Group 1, based at Cam Ranh Bay but itself was assigned to Vung Tau from February 1967. It was largely responsible for assisting in harbour defence, Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD), harbour patrols and port command and communications during Operation Stabledoor (1967-1970).³⁰ In addition to these responsibilities, CDT 3 was called on to conduct marine salvage operations, especially where EOD might be called for, river clearing in preparation for riverine military operations and recovery of enemy ammunition.

The largest RAN contribution however was supplied by the deployment of Australian destroyers to Vietnam. The destroyers came under the command of COMNAVFORV, primarily operating with the US Seventh Fleet and in March 1967, HMAS Hobart, was the first to see action.³¹ HMA Ships Hobart and Perth alternated six month deployments until March 1969 when Australia's newest DDG, HMAS Brisbane arrived. Brisbane was replaced by Vendetta, a Daring Class Destroyer which was in turn replaced by Perth and Hobart respectively before completing RAN participation in the Vietnam conflict.³² Hobart, being the first RAN vessel to arrive in Vietnam under combat conditions, participated in Operation Rolling Thunder's maritime equivalent, Operation Sea Dragon. This was designed primarily to intercept Water Borne Logistic

Craft (WBLC) and bomb military and logistic targets north of the DMZ. Sea Dragon was suspended in November 1968 during Perth's second deployment. After this, RAN vessels' primary task was to provide Naval Gunfire Support (NGFS) for ground operations near the coast.

Whilst the threat of naval or air assault on Australian vessels was not very large³³, as was the threat of sea borne mines. However, during inshore operations against WBLCs and in support of amphibious assaults, the ships were somewhat exposed to ground fire. In September 1967 Perth was hit by fire from a shore battery whilst in the pursuit of WBLC. Australian vessels were also used in conjunction with 1 ATF in Phuoc Tuy. In May 1970 Hobart relieved USS St Paul and provided NGFS for Australian troops in the Long Hai Hills.³⁴

The Royal Australian Navy also played a considerable role in the deployment of Australian troops and supply to 1 ATF and RAN vessels in the Gulf of Tonkin. Primary amongst these was HMAS Sydney, an aircraft carrier converted into a troop transport. 1 RAR was despatched aboard HMAS Sydney from Sydney to Vung Tau in May 1965. HMA Ships Jeparit and Boonaroo acted as supply ships for Australian forces in Vietnam and were particularly important in supplying HMAS Vendetta with ammunition during its deployment.³⁵

Other aspects of RAN involvement in Vietnam included the dispatch of 8 pilots and support staff for retraining and posting with US 135th Aviation Company at Vung Tau in October 1967. The RAN Helicopter Flight Vietnam (RANHFV) was used for troop insertion and as gunships for support fire. The RAN also provided pilots as part of a detachment to No.9 Squadron RAAF at Nui Dat, operating in cooperation with 1 ATF.³⁶

The Royal Australian Navy personnel in Vietnam totalled 2800. As far as possible RAN forces were directed to operate in cooperation with 1 ATF in Phuoc Tuy Province, consistent with the concept of having an Australian sphere of influence. Whilst operational command was reserved for COMNAVFORV, the degree of integration with Australian forces was maintained until the last RAN vessel, HMAS Sydney departed from Vung Tau in February 1972.

Assessment of Australian Military Operations

AATTV: Quite obviously if the general method of operations practiced by Australian forces was significantly different to those employed by US forces, then so to would the training techniques. The AATTV, in instructing Vietnamese officers, often found themselves contradicting or being contradicted by US advisers. In addition to this, such was the social status acquired by being an officer in ARVN that Junior officers were discouraged from humiliating their seniors by learning more than they. Particularly if one trained junior officer was expected to serve under an untrained (by AATTV or others) senior officer.³⁷ AATTV advisers serving with Montegnard units found that ethnic rivalry between Montegnards and the Vietnamese often resulted in 'no shoot' agreements being made with the NLF and VC forces entering Vietnam via Laos or Cambodia. Peterson's Montegnard Special Forces at one stage in 1964 even rebelled, marching on ARVN forces in Ban Me Thout.³⁸

AATTV operations under COMMACV were quite successful. There were few problems in the actual command system, save that there were disagreements over methodology when it came to instruction. AATTV's only real problems came from working with the ARVN forces, whom they frequently found to be unenthusiastic, lazy and often corrupt.

1 RAR and US 173rd Abn Bde: There were again general differences of opinion between these two units as to the conduct of operations. The Airborne Brigade was designed for large

deployments and heavy firepower whereas 1 RAR, even though restructured to suit the American style, with its COIN experience in Malaya operating individually from larger units was unfamiliar and uncomfortable with these type of tactics.³⁹ One such example of this was 1 RAR's training with helicopters. In Malaya, up to 4 helicopters, primarily for medevac purposes, was all a company could expect or need. There was no requirement for the calling of air strikes and little for artillery strikes. Yet at Bien Hoa, the latter of these two were frequently practiced, due to the number of enemy being engaged, and up to 40 helicopters were effectively at the disposal of the battalion.⁴⁰ Unlike subsequent Australian forces, there was little association with ARVN forces and no reliance on them.

Australian Task Force: 1 ATF met with mixed successes during its five years in Phuoc Tuy. Initially, 5 & 6 RAR encountered large scale opposition and attempted to combat NLF political structure. Given the limitations under which 1 ATF worked (poor equipment, ambiguous objectives and unfamiliar combat environment), it could be asserted that it was quite successful in doing this.⁴¹ Long Tan and the subsequent follow up missions severely damaged NLF main force units in the region, however, it is apparent that the relative speed with which the NLF reasserted itself in the years of ATF's withdrawal indicates the failure to win the hearts and minds of the people, a tactic essential to the defeat of communist terrorists in Malaya and Borneo.

The increase in size of 1 ATF in November 1967 introduced new problems and new challenges to the Australians. From January, 1 ATF operated in engagements outside of Phuoc Tuy. These were again large scale operations and required some degree of integration with American forces. Similar problems to those experienced by 1 RAR in 1965 were encountered, somewhat lessened in effect by the larger size of 1 ATF (two battalions were distributed through three bases; Balmoral, Coogee and Coral) and its increased independence from II FFV HQ. The defence of Bien Hoa during the TET offensive in February 1968 was successful in so far as 1 ATF maintained a relatively high enemy body count and weren't themselves overrun. However, the nature of the war was such that victories in large scale battle counted for little. It was hoped that 1 ATF could secure a credible victory in Phuoc Tuy, one similar in nature to Australia's military experience in Malaya, where the enemy was totally wiped out, the people supportive of the Australian presence and the province safe from subversion. ...an effect, a lasting and significant impact on the province, culminating in the battle of Binh Ba in June 1969. 1 ATF returned to Phuoc Tuy, after several redeployments to Bien Hoa, and engaged in the third phase of their operations, the pacification of Phuoc Tuy.⁴²

This phase, from about mid-1969 to 1971, met with mixed success also. Although carrying out operations which Australian troops were more familiar with, the degree of success encountered was somewhat less than expected. The reasons for this relative failure include not only the ineptitude of ARVN forces, cooperation with whom was essential in maintaining an allied presence in any given area, but also several rather glaring deficiencies in Australian planning. An ambitious project by Vincent in 1967 to create a minefield barrier from Dat Do to Phuoc Hai, described by Westmoreland as "imaginative", had resulted in a substantial number of casualties (almost thirty) in operations in the Long Hai hills in May 1969 and again by 8 RAR in January 1970.⁴³ Whilst it may have been the responsibility of ARVN forces to patrol the minefield, it was apparent that Vincent was remiss in expecting them to do so. In addition to this, Larsen identifies one major deficiency in the Australian civil aid program, claiming that lack of coordination with local administration often resulted in poor planning and inadequate maintenance of completed projects.⁴⁴

Quite clearly the major reason for the failure of 1 ATF to complete a total victory in Phuoc Tuy was the lack of cooperation between ARVN and 1 ATF and the failure of the civil aid program to win the support of the populace away from the NLF. Australia's attempts to train and equip RVN local units and their reluctance to allow these units any significant participation in the pacification program, coupled with the failure of these local units to perform adequately, destined Phuoc Tuy to be returned to the influence of the NLF on the ATF's withdrawal.

Conclusion

The Nixon (Guam) Doctrine announced in July 1969 and the British decision to quit East Of Suez by 1971 led to a radical rethinking of Australian defence and foreign policy in Southeast Asia. Consistent with the withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam, Australia also withdrew, the last Australian troops to leave being the AATTV. The defeat of the Liberal-Country Party coalition government coincided with this final withdrawal. Australia had spent ten years actively involved in the conflict in Vietnam, sending almost 47 000 [sic] men, almost 500 of whom were killed and about 2 400 wounded. Australia paid its own way through Vietnam, employed its own tactical methods, adopted its own province and pursued its own political ends. Australian's were noted to have hated everybody, the truth of which may lay under a mixture of racial prejudice and discontent at the limitations they were placed under compared to the excesses of their American allies.

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 31. pp.97-98, Larson, et.al, op.cit
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 33. Perhaps with the exception of air assault from USAF jets, Hobart was struck by three missiles in June 1968, killing two and wounding several. The fighters also attacked two patrol craft, sinking one
 34. pp.59-61, 85, Ibid
 35. pp.170-173, Vendetta used British ammunition which had to be shipped from Sydney.
 36. p.99, Larsen, et.al., op.cit
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"For I will work the work in your days which ye will not believe, though it be told to you"

Habakkuk, 7th Century BC

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