

AUSTRALIAN- VIETNAM WAR - HISTORY

The Vietnam War was Australia's longest military commitment to any conflict. Between 1962 and 1975, about 60 000 Australians served in Vietnam or its waters and airspace.

Up until 1954, North and South Vietnam had both been part of French Indo-China. The area was occupied by the Japanese during World War II, then French forces returned to reassert colonial rule. The First Indo-China War, an uprising against the French, started in late 1945. When it ended in 1954, an agreement was made to split Indo-China into North and South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. The division between North Vietnam (Democratic Republic of Vietnam) and South Vietnam (Republic of Vietnam) was intended to be temporary, with free elections scheduled for July 1956. Reunification was not achieved until, after nearly two decades of war, it was forcibly imposed with the military victory of Communist North Vietnam in April 1975.

The breaking up of Indo-China occurred as the Cold War between the Communist Bloc and the West escalated. Having prevented a Communist takeover of South Korea during the Korean War, the United States (US) was determined to also support South Vietnam. As the French withdrew from the region in the mid 1950s, US support for South Vietnam was stepped up. Direct aid began in 1955, and in 1956 a US Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) was formed to train South Vietnamese forces.

This was an important development, as in 1959 the North Vietnamese sanctioned, and then subsequently supported, a Communist insurgency to destabilise the government and eventually mount a revolution in South Vietnam. The US, Australia and several other countries declared their support for South Vietnam and, in the face of mounting guerrilla successes, soon found themselves under pressure to increase their support by providing direct military assistance to the South Vietnamese.

First Australian deployments

After several overtures, in December 1961 the Republic of Vietnam requested Australian military assistance. After consulting with the Defence Committee and the Americans, Prime Minister Menzies agreed to commit a small number of Australian troops. On 24 May 1962 the Government announced the dispatch of military advisers to assist in the training of South Vietnamese forces. On 31 July the first members of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV) arrived in Saigon.

The AATTV was at first restricted to training troops of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). The only other Australian military involvement at this stage was a single transport aircraft of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) that was sent in with food and medical supplies for refugees. On 1 June 1963, the first Australian death in the war was recorded when Sergeant William Hacking of the AATTV was accidentally killed. The AATTV continued in its role of training South Vietnamese troops, and in June 1964 the Australian Government announced that the unit would be expanded and that henceforth, advisors could serve in combatant units. The first Australian combat death was recorded not long afterwards, with

Warrant Officer Kevin Conway of the AATTV being killed in action at Nam Dong on 6 July 1964. A further commitment occurred the following month, when the RAAF Transport Flight Vietnam was deployed with Caribou aircraft.

With pressure coming from the Americans as well as the South Vietnamese for an increased military commitment, the Australian Government made a key decision to boost the strength of its military forces. This would provide for an increased commitment in Vietnam and also meet other national and regional defence needs. On 10 November 1964, the National Service (Conscription) Act was passed to reintroduce national service. Whilst this decision was not specifically related to the Vietnam War, the war was a large factor—men conscripted for a period of two years were liable to be sent to Vietnam as well as other locations. The first ballot for National Service was drawn in March 1965, with the first intake beginning recruit training that June.

In early 1965, the Australian Government agreed to dispatch an infantry battalion to South Vietnam. The leading troops of the 1st Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR), landed on 3 June in a chartered Qantas aircraft. This was the first use of Qantas charters to move troops into (and out of) South Vietnam, and ‘skippy flights’, as they came to be known, would continue at regular intervals almost until the end of Australia’s commitment to the war. Another significant event occurred on 8 June, when the transport ship (converted aircraft carrier) HMAS Sydney, with destroyer escort HMAS Parramatta and HMAS Duchess, arrived at Vung Tau on the first of what became regular naval logistical support operations.

1RAR, the only infantry battalion deployed to Vietnam that was comprised wholly of regular troops, was deployed in Bien Hoa with the US 173rd Airborne Brigade. It was soon built up to a battalion group with artillery, armoured personnel carriers, army aviation and logistical support units. The battalion group saw some heavy fighting, suffering twenty-three men killed during its one-year tour of duty. Meanwhile, members of the AATTV continued serving with South Vietnamese forces, and on 13 November 1965 Warrant Officer Kevin ‘Dasher’ Wheatley of the AATTV was killed in action. His was the first of four Victoria Crosses awarded to Australians, all members of the AATTV, in this war.

1st Australian Task Force

In March 1966, the Australian Government announced the deployment of a larger force. Its 4 500 troops would include two infantry battalions, Special Air Service (SAS) troops and supporting units. The 1st Australian Task Force (1ATF) was to be deployed in Phuoc Tuy Province, south-east of Saigon. This area was allocated to the Australians after negotiations with the South Vietnamese and Americans—Phuoc Tuy was away from the Cambodian border and areas in the north where fighting was expected to be heavier, and it was on the coast, which would enable the Australians to control their own logistical support with deliveries by sea as well as air.

Between April and June 1966, 1ATF was established at Nui Dat, in the centre of Phuoc Tuy. During operations to secure the area, the Task Force suffered its first battle death on 24 May, when Private Errol Noack of 5RAR died of wounds—he was also the first National Serviceman

to lose his life on active service. At the same time as the operational base was established, the 1st Australian Logistic Support Group established the logistical base on the coast at Vung Tau.

Within two months, the first big battle was fought, when 'D' Company, 6RAR, ran into a large enemy force moving against Nui Dat. In heavy fighting at Xa Long Tan, 'D' Company held out for several hours until a relief force reached them. The Australians lost eighteen men killed—seventeen from 'D' Company and one from the relief force—and twenty-four wounded, while inflicting at least 245 dead on the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong force. This battle asserted Australian dominance on Phuoc Tuy.

The Australians' presence in the province was not seriously challenged again, but control of Phuoc Tuy required constant and determined operations by 1ATF both inside the Province and also sometimes in areas of neighbouring Provinces, especially in 1968 during the enemy's Tet and other offensives. While big battles such as Long Tan and later Coral/Balmoral in May 1968 or Binh Ba in June 1969 made the headlines, for the most part troops of 1ATF conducted extensive patrols or cordon-and-search operations, and clashes were of a smaller scale than in other wars—as was to be expected in counter-insurgency warfare.

The brunt of operations and casualties was borne by the nine infantry battalions that served on rotation in South Vietnam, two or three at a time—1RAR through to 7RAR serving two tours each, and 8RAR and 9RAR, formed later, serving one tour each. Some supporting units also served one-year rotations, while other units were deployed to Vietnam for several years, with the personnel rotated through on deployments of up to one year.

RAAF and RAN

The RAAF contributed three flying units—No. 2 Squadron with Canberra bombers, which bombed enemy supply lines and also conducted close air support; No. 9 Squadron with Iroquois helicopters that were used as gunships and for battle area transports and medical evacuations; and No. 35 Squadron, the enlarged and retitled Transport Flight Vietnam, with Caribou aircraft, which flew transport sorties all over South Vietnam. In addition, several ground units essential for logistical support and for construction and maintenance of airfields, such as No. 5 Airfield Construction Squadron, were deployed. A small number of Australian pilots were also attached to US squadrons, usually as forward air controllers.

Throughout the course of the main Australian deployment, Hercules aircraft from Nos 36 and 37 Squadrons based at Richmond, New South Wales, made regular supply flights into South Vietnam and, with staff of No. 4 RAAF Hospital at Butterworth, Malaysia, also conducted medical evacuation flights of wounded and sick personnel. At the same time, Qantas aircraft chartered by the military delivered many troops at the start of their tours and brought home many whose tours had finished.

The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) mounted a considerable logistical support operation through the main Australian deployment. The transport ship HMAS Sydney and the leased merchant ships HMAS Jeparit and HMAS Boonaroo, with their destroyer escorts, conducted more than twenty logistical support missions, delivering units, equipment and supplies from Australia to

South Vietnam. Some Australian Army personnel served in Sydney on liaison duties, as the ship mainly carried army personnel and materiel to and from the war zone, while a small number of merchant seamen served alongside naval personnel in Jeparit and Boonaroo. The 'Vung Tau ferry', as Sydney became known, also returned with units that had completed their tours and later evacuated equipment as the Australian commitment was wound down.

Starting with HMAS Hobart during 1967, several destroyers were attached to the US Seventh Fleet for operations on the gun line off the Vietnamese coast. The warships patrolled coastal waters and took part in naval bombardments. On shore, the first unit deployed was Clearance Diving Team 3, which examined vessels for mines and conducted de-mining operations in harbours and rivers and on land. The RAN Helicopter Flight was also deployed, attached to the US Army's 135th Assault Helicopter Company, flying Iroquois helicopters on gunship, battle-area transport and medical evacuation flights.

Civilians

Australian civilians also served in the operational area, following patterns set in previous wars. Members of philanthropic organizations, such as the Australian Red Cross, Salvation Army and the YMCA, served with military units in several roles including supporting medical and nursing staffs in the care of hospital patients, distributing 'comforts' to dispersed units, and offering religious guidance and moral support. Other civilians served in the logistical support role, including merchant seamen on the supply ships HMAS Jeparit and Boonaroo, and Qantas flight crews on military-chartered 'skippy flights' that carried personnel into and out of South Vietnam. There were also performers and technicians flown in to entertain the troops, Department of Defence and other public servants, contractors, and the like. Serving elsewhere in South Vietnam were civilian medical teams raised under the auspices of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO). Raised by hospitals around Australia, they delivered medical services and aid to the Vietnamese people.

Withdrawal of forces

After the enemy's Tet Offensive in 1968, support for the war diminished. Anti-war movements had begun in the USA and Australia, and protests intensified. By 1970, the USA and its partners were reducing their military commitments to South Vietnam. In early 1971 Prime Minister McMahon announced that Australian forces would be withdrawn. This was achieved over the following year. The last members of the AATTV and Australian Army Assistance Group Vietnam were pulled out in December 1972. Only a small number of Australian troops then remained in South Vietnam.

A ceasefire was announced on 27 January 1973. This enabled American and allied forces to complete their withdrawals. The last remaining Australian troops, the Saigon Embassy Guard, were pulled out on 30 June 1973.

With American and allied, including Australian, forces withdrawn from the war, an uneasy truce existed between North and South Vietnam. On 4 January 1974, after violations of the ceasefire

by both sides, South Vietnam declared that the war was restarted. Without American military support, South Vietnamese forces struggled to contain an enemy offensive. By March 1975, North Vietnamese forces were advancing on Saigon. Meanwhile, Khmer Rouge forces seized control of neighboring Cambodia.

During March and April 1975, RAAF Hercules and Dakota aircraft were dispatched to assist humanitarian efforts in South Vietnam, with one flight also into Cambodia. They delivered Red Cross and United Nations supplies and evacuated embassy officials and their families, foreign nationals and some refugees, namely war orphans evacuated from Saigon to Bangkok in Operation Baby Lift. Australia's military involvement in the war ended on 25 April 1975 with the last Hercules flights into and out of Saigon.

On 30 April 1975, North Vietnamese forces captured Saigon. This effectively ended the Vietnam War, which had raged across the country, and into Cambodia and Laos, for nearly two decades—if the First Indo-China War is included, the area had been torn by conflict for almost thirty years.

About 60 000 Australians had served in Vietnam—approximately 50 000 'frontline' participants and the remainder in the logistical support role. Of those, 520 members of the armed forces are listed on Australia's Roll of Honour



Double Click on Pin Point. Roll of Honour will Open...