

Meeting the Needs of War: The Australian Army and the Vietnam War

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Introduction

On 8 March 1965, as South Vietnam neared collapse under pressure from the communist North and its local Viet Cong proxies, the Marines of the Ninth US Marine Expeditionary Force came ashore at Danang. They represented the first combat troops the United States committed to what would become the Vietnam War as well as a change in mission from one of advising to fighting. A month later, soldiers from the US Army 173rd Airborne Brigade (Separate) arrived at Bien Hoa near Saigon. From this initial commitment would grow a force that at its peak would number more than half a million US military personnel.¹ In response, the North Vietnam leader, Ho Chi Minh, decreed a new military service law that expanded the North's Army by nearly 300,000 soldiers.

Australia's limited military resources meant it would only ever be a junior partner in the war and that it was up to the United States to bear nearly all the burden. Yet, while Australia's military strength was miniscule, when compared to the might of the United States and to their Vietnamese opponent, Australia exhibited an enthusiasm for the war all out of proportion to its contribution. This was because what drove Australia's decision to support an escalation of the war was not solely consideration of South Vietnam's survival. Rightly, Australia's political leaders saw the crisis as an opportunity to advance their own national interests. Consequently, a critical consideration for the Australian Government was the perception its support engendered in Washington. Australia's primary goal was to encourage the United States to commit militarily to a region of the world that Canberra considered essential for its own security, but was not an area of traditional responsibility for Washington.

In seeking to achieve its political objectives, Australia was initially successful. Enduring success, however, requires victory, and preferably a swift one. The length of the war and the eventual defeat of the United States jeopardised much of what Australia had aimed to achieve. The defeat also contributed to a shift in Australian Defence Policy and to a remaking of the Army.

Defining the Politics

'Forward Defence' was the term given to the Australian security policy that was in place during the Vietnam War. It came into effect at the start of the Cold War and defined Australian security policy up to the end of the Vietnam War, when the Government replaced it with

¹ Michael Sullivan, 'In Danang, Where US Troops First Landed, Memories of War Have Faded,' *National Public Radio*, 2 May 2015 at <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/05/02/403597845/in-danang-where-u-s-troops-first-landed-memories-of-war-have-faded> (accessed 27 August 2019).

a greater emphasis on self-reliance. In brief, the goal of Forward Defence was to maintain as wide a distance as possible between Australia and the communist nations of Asia. The Government feared that if allowed, a southward flow of communism would narrow this gap and eventually bring its threat to Australia's shores. Australia's defence policy was to cooperate with like-minded states to deter the expansion of communism in Asia, particularly throughout South-East Asia. This was the driving force behind Australia's decision to join the South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) and to help the United Kingdom in fighting the Chinese-communist insurgency in Malaya during what was known as the *Emergency*, as well as the *Confrontation* with Indonesia.

An assumption held to by the Australian Government was the 'Domino Theory'. The long-serving Prime Minister of Australia, Robert Menzies, accepted that if one state fell to communism others would also topple, an outcome that was inimical to Australia's well-being. In an address to Parliament, Menzies stated that it 'is of immense importance to us that the free nations of South-East Asia should not fall one by one to Communist aggression.'²

Of particular concern for the Government was the communist-leaning Sukarno regime in Indonesia, Australia's closest neighbouring state. By the time of the US-combat commitment in Vietnam, Australia had already been at war, albeit undeclared, with Indonesia for three years. Confrontation was a low-intensity border war and the goal of the United Kingdom and its allies, including Australia, was to oppose Indonesian efforts to destabilise the new Federation of Malaysia. Had Malaysia collapsed, it could lead to a revitalised communist insurgency on the peninsula, which was then in its final stage, and the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the region. Neither outcome was of benefit to Australian security.³

From the Australian point of view, much of the rationale for the war in Vietnam was about assuring security from Indonesia and preventing the expansion of communism. A 1958 Defence Committee Report asserts that Indonesia had 'great strategic importance to Australia,' and that it was a 'most important factor in both Australian and regional security.'⁴ According to Australia's official historian of the wars in South-East Asia, Professor Peter Edwards, Canberra did not see Vietnam as a major problem until very late in the day. Instead, Indonesia absorbed most of the Government's national security attention.⁵ Consequently, defence planning against Indonesia loomed large in Australian thinking from the mid 1950s to well into the 1960s.⁶ In fact, the perceived threat of a communist Indonesia was largely behind the 1964 decisions to

² *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 4 April 1957, p. 572.

³ John Blaxland, 'Australia, Indonesia and Southeast Asia,' in Peter J Dean, Stephen Frühling & Brendan Taylor, eds., *Australia's Defence: Towards a New Era?*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2014, pp. 110-11.

⁴ Quoted in Clinton Fernandes, *Island off the Coast of Asia: Instruments of Statecraft in Australian Foreign Policy*, Monash University Press, Clayton, 2018, p. 93.

⁵ Peter Edwards, 'Some reflections on the Australian Government's commitment to the Vietnam War,' in Jeffrey Grey and Jeff Doyle, eds., *Vietnam: war, myth and memory, Comparative perspectives on Australia's war in Vietnam*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1992, p. 9.

⁶ Ian McNeill, 'The Australian Army and the Vietnam War,' in Peter Pierce, Jeffrey Grey and Jeff Doyle, eds., *Vietnam Days: Australia and the Impact of Vietnam*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1991, p. 12.

reorganise the Army and reintroduce national service.⁷

Australian security planning has always presumed that the nation was unable to defend itself on its own against a significant threat. At the time of Federation in 1901, Australian political and defence leaders accepted that the threat would come from Asia. It is not surprising, therefore, that for much of its history Australia sought to bolster its defence against Asia rather than with Asia.⁸

To offset its defence limitations Australia has consistently sought the protection of a Great Power. Up to the Second World War, the United Kingdom performed this function and since then it has been the task of the United States. Even today, the United States remains Australia's most important security partner and the ANZUS Treaty is the foundation on which the nation's security rests. As is stated in the most recent Defence White Paper, ANZUS is at the core of Australian security and defence planning.⁹ This is the basis of what security thinkers have long called the 'insurance policy.'

The explanation for how Australian soldiers found themselves at war in Vietnam is a multifaceted one. Being seen to support a friendly great power was a factor and the Menzies Government accepted that Australia could not expect protection if it was unwilling to play its part in the common defence.¹⁰ By making a commitment, no matter its size, Australia would demonstrate that it was a reliable and willing ally. According to its Ambassador in Washington, the provision of support 'would help make Australia's mark with the United States Administration'.¹¹ The US President, Lyndon Johnson, made it clear that he expected more free world countries to 'show their flags in South Vietnam,' and Australia consistently did so.¹² Australia's expectation was that in return the United States would remain militarily committed to Australia's neighbourhood and engaged with ANZUS and SEATO.¹³

Still, how Australian soldiers ended up in Vietnam is a more nuanced story than simply fulfilling a quid pro quo expectation. Virtually alone, Australia was the only US partner or friend to push for combat operations; America's European allies, including the United Kingdom were far less enthusiastic if not outright opposed.¹⁴ One of the objectives of Australian defence policy was to have the United States accept military responsibility for the security of South-East Asia.¹⁵ In its communications with the United States, Australia was firm on the need to intervene and confirmed its willingness to provide military support. At no point

⁷ John Blaxland, *Organising an Army: The Australian Army Experience, 1957-1965*, Australian National University, Canberra, 1989, pp. 89-114. See also Albert Palazzo, *The Australian Army: A History of its Organisation, 1901-2001*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2001, pp. 265-79.

⁸ Blaxland, 'Australia, Indonesia and Southeast Asia,' p. 107.

⁹ *Defence White Paper, 2016*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2016, p. 121, at <http://www.defence.gov.au/WhitePaper/Docs/2016-Defence-White-Paper.pdf> (accessed 31 July 2019).

¹⁰ *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 4 April 1957, p. 572.

¹¹ 'Australia's Military Commitment to Vietnam', Paper tabled in accordance with the Prime Minister's statement to the House of Representative, p. 6.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹³ T B Millar, *Australia in Peace and War*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1978, p. 16.

¹⁴ Glen St J Barclay, *A Very Small Insurance Policy: The Politics of Australian involvement in Vietnam, 1954-1967*, Queensland University Press, St Lucia, 1988, p. 90.

¹⁵ Fernandes, *Island off the Coast of Asia*, p. 81.

did the Australian Government perceive any risks in intervention, just opportunity.¹⁶ From this perspective, the Vietnam War was a chance to achieve an Australian political end.

To encourage what it sought, the Australian Government let the United States know that it would support a combat commitment. In late 1964, for example, the Australian Cabinet indicated its willingness to commit a battalion to Vietnam, a decision that Menzies conveyed to Johnson.¹⁷ Shortly thereafter, the Australian Ambassador in Washington used diplomatic channels to reinforce the message. He let the Americans know that Canberra was receptive to a request for troops.¹⁸ Seeking the permission of the South Vietnamese government came very late in the proceedings.¹⁹ It would be going too far to suggest that Australia played a pivotal role in the US decision. No one expected Australia's contribution to be large or decisive and the United States made up its own mind. Yet 'the Australian Government's wish to have Americans in Vietnam was undoubtedly much stronger than the American Government's wish to have Australians there.'²⁰

After the war's end, a report prepared by the Australian Government summarised the goals for its participation in the war. The report observed:

The provision of military aid by Australia was decided upon for political reasons and was in support of the fundamental aim of Australian policy towards South Vietnam, which was to ensure the long-term defence interests of Australia. These were seen in terms of the ANZUS and SEATO Treaties and the theory of forward defence against the victory of communism in Southeast Asia, an area seen a vital to Australia's future.

The report continued:

The cornerstone of this policy was seen as a compelling necessity to commit the power of the United States to the Asian area and then to commit her to a tactical guarantee of active support to Australia through the ANZUS and SEATO Treaties.²¹

Australia's Ambassador to Washington summed up the position nicely. On Australia's aim for the war, he wrote, 'to achieve such an habitual closeness of relations with United States and sense of mutual alliance that in our time of need the United States would have little option but to respond as we would want.'²²

Once the United States decided to intervene with combat troops, Australia had secured

¹⁶ Barclay, *A Very Small Insurance Policy*, p. 99.

¹⁷ McNeill, 'The Australian Army and the Vietnam War', p. 27.

¹⁸ Barclay, *A Very Small Insurance Policy*, p. 79.

¹⁹ On arranging the Australian commitment see, Michael Sexton, *War for the Asking: How Australia Invited Itself to Vietnam*, New Holland, Sydney, 2002.

²⁰ Coral Bell, *Dependent Ally: A Study in Australian Foreign Policy*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1988, p. 76.

²¹ 'Australia's Military Commitment to Vietnam', Paper tabled in accordance with the Prime Minister's statement to the House of Representative, pp. 2-3.

²² Barclay, *A Very Small Insurance Policy*, p. 50.

its main war aim. Yet this did not mean that Australia could declare victory and go home. Rather, it meant that Australia was now just as committed as the United States to the war's outcome and it had to demonstrate that it was also willing to pay the price to keep in the favour of its ally. Thus, seemingly without the Government considering the consequences, Australia was captive to war's fortune.

Managing the Commitment

On 29 April 1965, Menzies announced his Government's decision to dispatch a battalion of soldiers to Vietnam. In fact, they were not the first Australians to serve there. Like the United States, Australia had had soldiers on the ground in an advising and training role since 1962. Rather, this represented a change in mission and an escalation in commitment, as well as risk. It was a recognition that the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) was not up to the task of saving its nation from the communist North. Saving South Vietnam was now the job of the United States and its allies.

In early June 1965, the First Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (RAR) arrived in Vietnam. It joined the US 173rd Brigade (Separate) as its third battalion, and would operate alongside the Yanks in the area of Bien Hoa. Besides convenience, there was a pragmatic reason for this arrangement. A battalion is not a self-supporting unit and the Australian Army was so deficient in logistic personnel that it could not sustain a single battalion on operations. It had to amalgamate with a US formation in order to be operationally viable.²³

Initially, the Government's Rules of Engagement limited the Australians to a garrison role, but that restriction soon proved untenable, both militarily and politically. It was not acceptable for the Australians to spend their time patrolling the environs of the base while their American colleagues sought out and fought the enemy. The lifting of this restriction brought to the fore one of the tension points between the two Allies — the US willingness to accept casualties if it brought about an engagement with the Viet Cong. The Americans were bold, noisy and spoiling for a fight during which they could bring massive firepower to bear, whereas the Australians preferred a quieter, stealthy approach. At night, it was easy to spot the Australian location at Bien Hoa; the Aussies were the part without illumination.

From an early stage, there was pressure from the United States for an increase in Australia's contribution. The US was pouring troops into Vietnam and ground troops mattered the most. Australia did not have any infantry to spare at home as it also had to consider the needs of Malaya and its ongoing concerns over Indonesia. All that could be provided were 250 soldiers from other combat arms – artillery, engineers, armour – which raised 1RAR to the status of a battalion group. Still, the future trajectory was clear and Australia did commence planning for a second battalion for 1966.²⁴

For the Australian Army Commander, Lieutenant General John Wilton, the difference in operational styles was concerning for two reasons. First, the US brashness went against

²³ McNeill, 'The Australian Army and the Vietnam War,' pp. 33-34.

²⁴ Australia's Military Commitment to Vietnam', Paper tabled in accordance with the Prime Minister's statement to the House of Representative, pp. 23-25.

the counter-insurgency lessons the Australians had learnt from their operations during the Malayan Emergency where victory dictated a slow, patient approach, the opposite of the US style of war. Second, Australia could not afford the same rate of casualties that the Americans were willing to trade with the Viet Cong. 1RAR was Australia's only available battalion, and until the recently initiated National Service scheme generated more infantrymen, the cupboard at home was bare.

Soon after its arrival at Bien Hoa, Wilton began to look for other options for Australia's contribution to the fight. His primary concern was the different operational style between the two allies, and the prospect for higher casualties than the Australian public was willing to bear. He also believed that fielding a separate force would result in greater national recognition, a key concern for any junior partner in a coalition. Maintaining relevance was the reason Australia decided to keep its national headquarters in Saigon, close to the US headquarters, rather than moving it to Phuoc Tuy with the task force. Visibility was a critical requirement for Australia. Being seen to be doing the job, even though its commitment was relatively small, was essential because the ultimate goal was to create a favourable impression in Washington.²⁵

Wilton considered a number of locations, but the most promising was Phuoc Tuy Province. It lay just to the east of Saigon so it was near Australia's national command headquarters and was close to the port of Vung Tau which simplified logistics while offering a quick exit if evacuation proved necessary. It was also not near any of Vietnam's land borders so the possibility of violating another country's territory was limited. Lastly, Route 15 ran through the province linking Saigon to Vung Tau, an important supply route that the United States needed someone to keep secure. Geographically it had everything Wilton wanted. It also met the military requirement; within its borders were plenty of Communists. The enemy controlled virtually the entire province and had done so since the defeat of the French in 1954. The Australians would be taking on a real job, one that the Americans needed doing.

Being able to act independently, however, necessitated that Australia make a larger military commitment. The Australian Government was willing to increase its forces because such a step also met the political goal of supporting the United States. While Australia had not received a formal request from either the United States or South Vietnamese Governments, the Americans had made it abundantly clear through indirect channels that they would appreciate a larger commitment. In return, this allowed Australia to make it clear to its allies that it would let them know when it was okay for them to ask for more troops. What was holding Australia back were too many commitments – Vietnam, Malaya and fears of Indonesia – and too few troops in the pipeline.

It was not until 19 February 1966 that Australia had the confidence that it could offer more troops and was willing to say so publically. On 4 March, the Australian ambassador in Saigon advised the South Vietnamese Government of the language it should use when making the expected request for additional support. Australia received the request on 7 March and the

²⁵ Barclay, *A Very Small Insurance Policy*, pp. 74 & 108; and D M Horner, *Australian higher Command in the Vietnam War*, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Canberra, 1986, p. 25.

Australian Government announced the increased commitment the next day.²⁶

The decision by Australia was to increase its ground force to a two battalion task force, which was to be known as 1 Australian Task Force (1ATF). With supporting arms that included a Special Air Service Squadron, a Field Regiment and a squadron of armoured personnel carriers meant that the deployment now numbered about 4500 men. In addition, Australia established a logistic base at Vung Tau. Despite the additions, 1ATF was not a fully independent force. Much of its support remained dependent on the United States and where possible the Task Force adopted American weapons to increase logistic compatibility.

While the increased commitment secured tangible political points with its ally, the Australian Cabinet also recognised the benefits to the nation's long-term security of having the United States committed to South-East Asia. From a military point of view, the larger commitment also eased Wilton's concerns. The Australians could now move into Phuoc Tuy and fight the war in their own style. Despite the benefits, the expansion was not without its challenges. The Army had to raise two new battalions, 5 and 6 RAR, and manpower was so short that each unit received fifty percent of its personnel in the final three months before deployment, minimising the time to incorporate national servicemen and to build cohesive teams. Upon arrival in Phuoc Tuy the infantry had to help build and guard the base at Nui Dat, as there were not enough engineering or garrison troops. Numbers remained a critical impediment to operations for the first two years in Phuoc Tuy, at least until the National Service scheme reached full operational potential and eased the supply of trained soldiers.²⁷

Having its own province only partially simplified operational decision-making for the Australians. While Australia had greater control over how it fought, it was incorrect to think that they actually owned the province. The ARVN was responsible for Phuoc Tuy's population centres, the Americans for the mentoring and training program of local force units, while the Australians had oversight over the countryside. The Australians also remained under US command becoming a field element of the US Army's II Field Force, a corps sized organisation led by a three-star general.²⁸

The other critical issue facing the Australians was trying to balance the tasks of destroying the enemy's combat units with the need to root out the communist cadres and committees from the villages. The basic tenet of Australian counter-insurgency doctrine was the importance of separating the enemy from the sources of its support amongst the civilian population.²⁹ The Malayan Emergency provided lessons, but they were misleading. In Malaya the Communist insurgents never numbered more than a handful who were often in pitiful shape, whereas

²⁶ Australia's Military Commitment to Vietnam', Paper tabled in accordance with the Prime Minister's statement to the House of Representative, pp. 26-28 and McNeill, 'The Australian Army and the Vietnam War,' p. 37.

²⁷ 'Cabinet Decision No. 60,' 2 March 1966, Australian War Memorial, AWM121, 248/4/145, and O'Neill, 'Australian Military Problems in Vietnam,' *Australian Outlook*, 23:1 (1969), p. 49. See also, Cable, *An Independent Command*, pp. 30-31. A list of 1ATF's establishment is found in Albert Palazzo, *Australian Military Operations in Vietnam*, Army History Unit, Canberra, 2009, p. 44.

²⁸ Horner, *Australian higher Command in the Vietnam War*, p. 30.

²⁹ R W Cable, *An Independent Command: Command and Control of the 1st Australian Task Force in Vietnam*, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Canberra, 2000, p. 18.

Phuoc Tuy was home to a Viet Cong Divisional Headquarters, two Main Force Regiments, a regional battalion and several company and platoon size local units.³⁰ All were heavily armed, well trained and capable of waging a pitched battle, such as occurred at Long Tan soon after the Australians established themselves in the province. Yet the true strength of the Viet Cong lay in its committee system that not only governed nearly the entire province, but also raised and distributed the food and taxes that the field units needed to remain operational. When the Australians arrived in Phuoc Tuy the South Vietnamese Government's authority existed in the provincial capital of Ba Ria but not far beyond. Most of the province and its people were firmly in communist hands.

No Australian commander satisfactorily resolved the dual needs of engaging the enemy and driving it from the province, or in eliminating the Viet Cong's hold over the villages. Invariably, the priority was to take on the enemy's military units through search and destroy or ambush operations and then to disrupt the Viet Cong's control of the villages, a practice that aligned with the preferences of US commanders to take the fight to the enemy. Compounding the challenge was that a two-battalion taskforce did not have the strength to do both tasks effectively at the same time. The lack of troops to prosecute necessary tasks led to the implementation of the imaginative but ultimately tragic barrier minefield project.

1ATF's second commander, Brigadier Stuart Graham, believed in the need to separate the enemy's field units from its civilian supporters. Trying to find the enemy in the jungle was a frustrating and time-consuming activity and there was no guarantee that a sweep would encounter any enemy. Graham also recognised that the enemy's weak point was its logistics. If the Viet Cong could be isolated from their supporters among the population, they would be cut off from their food supply. This would leave the enemy with two options — vacate the province or concentrate for an attack to relieve the pressure and in doing so run the risk of destruction from superior Australian and US firepower.

Graham decided to build a barrier minefield to sever the link between the enemy's field units and their support base. The province's granary was centred on the town of Dat Do in Phuoc Tuy's south; most of the rest of the province was jungle. After the harvest, communist supporters smuggled the crop out of the growing area into the nearby jungle for distribution across the province and beyond. Once it reached the jungle, the odds of interception were slim. Graham therefore aimed to stop the rice from getting to the jungle.

Graham's plan called for 1ATF to build a mine barrier from the sea to the Australian firebase at the Horseshoe feature just north of Dat Do. The barrier would have a number of checkpoints where, after inspection, local people could safely cross. Between 6 March and 1 June 1967, Australian engineers emplaced over 20,000 M16A1 mines. Once completed, Graham's plan called for local South Vietnamese military units to patrol the barrier in order to prevent the Viet Cong from marking paths through it or from removing mines. Graham did not want to use his better-trained soldiers on such a minor and, from the Australian point-of-view, demeaning task. Instead, the Aussies would get on with hunting the enemy in the jungle

³⁰ It should be noted that the communist borders for Phuoc Tuy province were not the same as that for the South Vietnamese Government. The Viet Cong version of the province included sizeable parts of neighbouring provinces.

knowing that the barrier had isolated the Viet Cong from its civilian support.

It was a logical and good plan, at least in conception. Poor implementation, however, can undo even the best plans and the barrier minefield was no exception. The local South Vietnamese forces failed to guard the barrier and as Graham had no authority over them, he could only complain to the provincial governor. The Viet Cong were soon helping themselves to ordnance from a conveniently located mine depot while breaches they cut through the barrier allowed them to continue to receive their supplies. What followed was entirely predictable. The Viet Cong replanted the mines in areas where the Australians were likely to be active or used them to help defend their bases in the jungle. Australian casualties from friendly mines spiked, and by 1969, the barrier had become a political problem back home. The next step was its removal.

1ATF's final expansion occurred in 1968 with the arrival of a third infantry battalion, soon followed by a squadron of tanks. This was the peak of the commitment, and with a Royal Australian Navy ship on the gun line and a squadron of Canberra bombers in country the Australian commitment had reached over 8000. Without a significant increase in the Army's force generation procedures it was the maximum amount Australia could sustain. With the extra battalion, 1ATF was able to increase its operational tempo and in doing so largely pushed the enemy's field forces over the province's border; at least how Saigon defined the border, where they became a problem for someone else, or deep into their sanctuaries such as the Long Hai Hills which Australians only entered at great peril. However, the enemy's presence in the villages remained unimpeded, in part because the population centres were not a part of the Australian area of operations, but also because of the greater focus on destroying the Viet Cong field forces.

As is well known, the Communist Tet Offensive in 1968 changed the complexion of the war. On one level, it saw 1ATF conduct major combat operations outside of Phuoc Tuy under US command. It should be noted that this was not unusual because Australian rules of engagement made allowance for such a need. It was also neither the first nor the last time the task force was responsive to a US operational request. What Tet changed most was the perception that the United States was winning the war. The enemy had the greater will to persevere, no matter the cost. While the war would continue for nearly four more years, the United States began to shift responsibility for the fight to the ARVN, as a prelude to a withdrawal. Vietnamisation of the fight became the priority, even though few Australians considered the local forces up to the task even as the final withdrawal neared. Senior commanders accepted that it was a 'face saving device.'³¹ While search and destroy operations continued to the war's end, the gradual withdrawal of US and Australian troops from Vietnam would soon begin.³²

If the build-up of the Australian forces in Vietnam was driven by Canberra's need to be seen as a willing and supportive ally, the pace of the withdrawal was also tied to US decisions. Australian announcements of force reductions followed US ones. The day after the US President, Richard Nixon, announced the withdrawal of 115,000 troops by mid-1970,

³¹ Quoted in Horner, *Australian higher Command in the Vietnam War*, p. 40.

³² Cable, *An Independent Command*, pp. 81-82.

the Australian Prime Minister, John Gorton, determined that a battalion would be withdrawn and not replaced. Further announcements by both governments followed. Finally, on 18 August 1971 the new Australian Prime Minister, William McMahon declared the bulk of the Australian deployment would be home by Christmas. All that was to remain in Phuoc Tuy was the Australian Army Training Team – Vietnam. A change of Government in December 1972 saw the final 30 advisors ordered home.³³

Conclusion

The United States did not decide upon its adventure in Vietnam without any consideration of the cost or risks. In fact, throughout the lead-up to the combat commitment, Johnson held serious discussions on whether to seek a negotiated settlement or simply pull out of Vietnam altogether and make the stand against communist expansion elsewhere in Southeast Asia. In the end, the arguments of the hawks in Johnson's administration and the Pentagon, and events such as the Tonkin Gulf Incident, led the United States down the path to war.

By contrast, no such hesitation existed in Australia. The Menzies Government saw opportunity in Vietnam; one Australia was not going to miss. Consequently, Australia encouraged the potential for the United States to become militarily involved in South-East Asia. Australia let the United States know that it would support such a decision, virtually alone among the world's democratic powers. For the Menzies Government, there was no apparent down side.

Australia played its part, albeit a small one, in ensuring the Vietnam War. At the peak, the Australian commitment numbered approximately 8000 personnel from all three services. Australian fatalities in the war numbered only about 520. It is worth asking how such a minor player as Australia could leverage a great power to work towards its war aim. Australia showed adeptness in exploiting a US weakness, a need to believe that the free world supported its decision to escalate the war. US sensitivity on this matter provided an opening for Australia to exploit.

Australia did gain what it sought, the involvement of the United States in South East Asia. Through the American involvement in its part of the world, Australia gained what it believed it could not provide by itself, a sense of security from the encroachment of communism writ small and Asia writ large. Yet, combatants rarely win wars at their commencement. Although, Australia had achieved its war aim when US combat troops came ashore at Danang, it was an aim that could only be sustained by a prolonged campaign. The first problem Australia faced was how to maintain American interest in a part of the war that was normally outside its prime areas of concern. This involved commitment; Australian troops would also have to fight. However, Australian wishfulness for the United States to keep the faith was bound to fail over the long haul. Nothing Australia did could overcome geography. The United States was not sufficiently interested in South East Asia to commit to a fight without end or without limits.

³³ Ian G McNeill, 'An Outline of the Australian Military Involvement in Vietnam, July 1962-December 1972,' *Defence Force Journal*, no. 24 (Sept/Oct 1980), pp. 51-53.

Instead, in the aftermath of Tet, the will of the United States began to collapse and so began the slow process of Vietnamisation and withdrawal.

The end of the war brought significant change to Australian defence policy. First, President Nixon's enunciation of the Guam Doctrine required its allies to do more to defend themselves. For Australia, this meant the end of 'Forward Defence,' and the commencement of a new era of defence security called, 'Self-Reliance'. Australia would need to do more for itself. It would continue to rely on ANZUS, but in a context in which it had more responsibility for its own security.

The other significant change was internal to the Australian Army. From the nation's founding, the Citizen Military Force, the militia, was the focus of its military power. A full-time professional field force only came into existence because of the need to participate in the occupation of Japan after the Second World War. Going forward, there would now be no doubt; the future was a full-time professional Army. The militia lost its status and began a long slide to irrelevance, a state of affairs that remains the case today.³⁴

In setting war aims and in determining whether to go to war, those who only consider the upside can often find themselves surprised by the outcome. It is easy to think about war with a victorious mindset, yet one party must play the role of the loser. Vietnam shows, as do Iraq and Afghanistan, that before chancing the "iron dice" of war, one should also consider the implications of defeat.

³⁴ Dayton McCarthy, "Becoming the 3rd XV: The Citizen military Forces and the Vietnam War, in Peter Dennis & Jeffery Grey, *The Australian Army and the Vietnam War, 1962-1972*, Army History Unit, Canberra, 2002, pp. 263-78.

