

THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY AND THE VIETNAM WAR 1962-1972

NEW ZEALAND'S COMMITMENT OF INFANTRY COMPANIES IN SOUTH VIETNAM 1967

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New Zealand's infantry commitment to the Vietnam War began on 11 May 1967. On that day 68 mainly infantrymen of 'V' Company Group, Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment (RNZIR) completed a journey that had taken them from Terendak Military Camp in Malaysia to the British base at Changi in Singapore and thence, by Royal New Zealand Air Force C130 aircraft, to Vung Tau in South Vietnam. From Vung Tau Royal Australian Air Force Caribous flew them to the 1st Australian Task Force base at Nui Dat, along with a substantial amount of supplies that had accompanied them. In the next two days successive flights brought another 110 men to Nui Dat. Shortly after lunch on the 13th, their commander, Major John Mace (a Duntroon graduate who would end his career as Chief of Defence Staff), was able to report that his unit was complete in its company location.¹

The arrival of the troops at Nui Dat was the end of a difficult process for New Zealand policymakers, who had had to confront the problem of securing New Zealand's interests in a situation where resources were limited, commitments substantial and the future uncertain. Three main influences bore on the outcome: New Zealand's attitude to the Vietnam War; Australian-New Zealand relations; and practical limitations on New Zealand's military capacity.

New Zealand perceived the Vietnam War through the lens of the forward defence in Southeast Asia concept that had come to underpin its approach to security from the late 1950s. This, the Defence Council had agreed in 1965, 'was the best means of ensuring the effective defence of New Zealand during the period up to 1970'.² The key to this policy, in New Zealand's view, was to keep its two main allies, the United Kingdom and the United States, involved in the region and pursuing a co-ordinated strategy.³ This involved co-operating with them in regional security arrangements, such as ANZAM and SEATO.

New Zealand's forward defence efforts in the mid-1960s were facilitated by association with Britain, its historic ally, mentor, and provider—an approach that accorded well with the attitudes of the very pro-British New Zealand public. The convenience of dealing with the familiar and the financial advantages that such association offered to a country whose relatively vulnerable economy was still heavily reliant on the British market were key influences in Wellington. The practical implications of this British orientation for the New Zealand armed forces were considerable. Always constrained by limited resources, they were greatly assisted by the British link. They were closely modelled on the British forces, based their operating procedures on British practices, and used mainly British equipment. The financial implications of changing this focus were daunting, and put New Zealand off trying to emulate Australia's efforts to bring their forces more into line with those of ANZUS partner and dominant power in the Pacific, the United States.

New Zealand forces were contributed to the British Commonwealth Far East Strategic Reserve from 1955—a Special Air Service (SAS) company, replaced by an infantry battalion in 1957, a frigate, a fighter squadron (periodically), and half a transport squadron provided a presence in Malaya and Singapore. The infantry, from 1964 designated 1st Battalion, Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment (1RNZIR), were based at Terendak Military Camp, towards the cost of which New Zealand made a proportionate contribution with Australia and the United Kingdom. With Australian and British battalions, 1RNZIR formed part of 28th Commonwealth Brigade. These forces' primary role initially was to provide a rapid response capability against an external threat to Malaya. As they were brought within the ambit of SEATO planning, this role subsequently became focused on the wider Southeast Asian region. As a secondary role, the Strategic Reserve battalions had taken part in the dying stages of the Malayan Emergency and from 1964 in Confrontation with Indonesia. In this latter conflict, 1RNZIR had served two tours in Borneo in 1965-66.

The problem for New Zealand was that this British framework was not secure. The Defence Council in 1965 had accepted as a 'political fact of life' that the British commitment in Southeast Asia would 'steadily decline'.⁴ This British shakiness seemed all the more reason for encouraging the continuing presence of the United States in the region—an aspiration that immediately focused Wellington's attention on the situation in South Vietnam, where the United States had become deeply involved in sustaining the government in the face of the challenge presented by the North Vietnam-backed Viet Cong. As early as 1962 New Zealand, and other American allies, had come under pressure to provide visible support for the American effort in South Vietnam, at that time restricted to non-combatant support.

New Zealand had responded to such pressure with noticeable hesitancy. It was not that it rejected the premise upon which American policy in Vietnam was based. Doubts at first centred on the feasibility of achieving a successful outcome, not least because of the weakness of the South Vietnamese government. A small engineer detachment was sent in 1964 to carry out constructive tasks, but the deterioration in the situation soon forced consideration of a combat contribution. In their approach to this issue New Zealand Ministers demonstrated the lack of enthusiasm that would permeate their whole Vietnam policy and leave New Zealand, as one official stylishly noted towards the end of the involvement, 'the most dovish of the hawks'.⁵ Although their doubts about the outcome were eventually allayed by the extent of American commitment—by 1967 most policymakers in Wellington believed that the war could not be lost but that a satisfactory resolution was still a distant prospect—attitudes were dominated by an unwillingness to commit New Zealand to additional expenditure on defence, especially expenditure that would require the use of scarce foreign exchange. Personal attitudes may have played a part. Keith Holyoake, the Prime Minister, had not served in the Second World War, and there is some evidence that he 'felt a reluctance to send men into battle in light of his own lack of similar service'.⁶ A lack of enthusiasm for operating outside a British framework was also influential. This was in part because such a commitment was not likely to be favoured by public opinion (to which Holyoake was always very sensitive). 'Even as late as 1970', Frank Corner, New Zealand's Ambassador in Washington from 1967 to 1971, would later recall, 'the general run of non-ideological New Zealanders ... were still old-style British in their instincts ... they shared a certain style of British superciliousness towards Americans and American culture and foreign policies; and they still tended to link their fate with that of Britain.'⁷ Finally, the additional costs that would be involved because of the likely need to re-equip a unit for service in South Vietnam, even within an Australian context, were another inhibiting factor.

In May 1965 the government decided to make available an artillery battery. The need to do something was accepted, if only to ensure that the American commitment to New Zealand security provided by the ANZUS Treaty was not undermined. Strong counter-arguments by the Secretary of Defence, JK Hunn, who was later described by one participant in the decision as having a 'marked pacifist outlook', were ignored (and even flushed down the toilet by the acting Minister of Defence).⁸ The artillery option was in line with New Zealand's contribution in the Korean War, would allow New Zealand troops to support rather than be supported, would bring fewer casualties than infantry, and would not interfere with New Zealand's effort in Malaysia.⁹ As a result of this decision 161 Battery RNZA began arriving at Bien Hoa air base on 15 July 1965.

As the build up of American forces in Vietnam proceeded in 1965-66, the size of New Zealand's contribution was a source of embarrassment to the government. Compared with the 400,000 US troops in the country by early in 1967, New Zealand's V Force was a paltry 150-strong. The fact that Americans were prone to making pro rata comparisons had been highlighted when the visiting President Lyndon Johnson met the New Zealand Cabinet on 20 October 1966. Although not directly requesting an increase in New Zealand's effort, he maintained that the military requirement would be 'fully met if each participant would contribute one fifth of one per cent of their populations'¹⁰—which in New Zealand's case would have meant a force of about 5000 men. Whereas New Zealand had previously deflected American pressure by emphasising the contribution it was making to the common regional effort in Malaysia, this excuse for doing less than its partners in South Vietnam had weakened by the end of 1967. Confrontation having ended in mid-1966, 1RNZIR had returned to Terendak from Borneo in September. In discussion with New Zealand representatives during

a seven-nation conference of Vietnam participants in Manila soon afterwards, the American commander in South Vietnam, General William Westmoreland, referred pointedly to the fact that neither the battalion nor an SAS detachment that had also served in Borneo were now committed; he was dismissive of concerns about weakening the Commonwealth Strategic Reserve, not least because a unit deployed from it to South Vietnam would be only a few hours away and could be easily redeployed to Malaysia if necessary.¹¹

Among the government's advisors, there was no longer any strong challenger to the proposition that New Zealand should support the Vietnam effort. The lone contrary voice provided by Hunn had been removed with his retirement in November 1965. Both External Affairs and Defence officials favoured a positive response to the American pressure. But the government was, for the time being, distracted by the need to ensure its own survival, as a general election approached. In the campaign Holyoake disclaimed any intention to increase V Force, but the outcome of the election on 26 November 1966, in which the National Party was returned with only a slight reduction in seats, did indicate broad support for National's policy of assisting South Vietnam.¹² With this hurdle out of the way, the government was able to approach the question of a further contribution with more confidence. In determining what this contribution might be the Australia-New Zealand relationship—the second major factor in the New Zealand decision—was influential.

The geographical proximity of and similarity of cultures in Australia and New Zealand has traditionally ensured a basic identity of interests, values and outlooks that has pushed both countries in the direction of co-operation and co-ordination, not least because decisions in one are likely to have political impact in the other. The Anzac experience is a powerful unifying element. This dates from their joint effort at Gallipoli in 1915, when a New Zealand and Australian Division was formed. The mutual respect that developed between the New Zealand and Australian troops during their defence of the tiny enclave in which they were confined would facilitate co-operation between their two countries in later conflicts. Close professional linkages between the two countries' armies in particular were enhanced by the attendance of New Zealand officer cadets at Duntroon and Portsea.

Despite this co-operative stance at a service level, New Zealand's peacetime association with Australia was traditionally fraught with difficulties. This stemmed largely from the imbalance in size between the two countries. Determined to avoid being bullied by its neighbour, New Zealand valued its involvement in a British-based security system all the more because it provided, in the United Kingdom, an alternative to reliance on Australia.¹³ A 'rivalry in patriotism' was evident every time Australia and New Zealand went to war, excluding the mini-conflicts in Malaya/Malaysia. This ranged from a race to get to South Africa first in 1899 to a desire on New Zealand's part to beat Australia with its announcement of its decision to send a ground force to Korea in 1950. This was a rivalry within a British context, and one that was largely of concern to New Zealand, as the smaller country.¹⁴ But the prospect of British withdrawal from east of Suez had, by the mid-1960s, undermined this New Zealand approach and placed a premium on co-operation with Australia to reach a satisfactory solution to the problem of maintaining a presence in Malaysia and Singapore. There was a noticeable warming of relations, helped in part by the rapport that developed between Holyoake and his Australian counterpart Harold Holt, who spent six days in New Zealand in early February 1967 in a deliberate effort to improve the relationship.¹⁵

When it came to operating in an American dominated theatre without British involvement, the New Zealand desire to upstage Australia had, in any case, been conspicuously absent. There had, for example, been no race to emulate Australia's commitment of combat advisers to South Vietnam in 1962, New Zealand confining itself to sending a civilian medical team.¹⁶ Wellington was always less interested than Canberra in courting favour in Washington. As the focus shifted to the deployment of combat units, Australian action tended to be a catalyst for New Zealand decision because the difficulties likely to accrue from a failure to move in step with Australia were recognised in Wellington. Even if unenthusiastic about the war, public opinion in New Zealand would have found a failure to stand shoulder to shoulder with Australia difficult to accept. Conversely those responsible for developing New Zealand's Vietnam stance were always conscious that it would be easier to sell involvement in an unfamiliar area without the comfortable British framework by presenting it as an Anzac response.

In Vietnam Anzac co-operation had begun at Bien Hoa in 1965. New Zealand's field artillery battery co-operated closely with the Australian 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR), which had also been deployed at Bien Hoa. and in 1966 moved with that unit to Nui Dat in Phuoc Tuy Province to join the Australian Task Force, where it was attached to 1st Field Regiment RAA. In providing support for an Australian infantry battalion, it replicated the situation that had existed in Korea, where one battery of 16th Field Regiment RNZA (usually 163 Battery) had directly supported 3RAR and later other RAR battalions. During the Battle of Long Tan in August 1966 New Zealand gunners, as the affiliated battery with 6RAR, had earned new respect among Australian infantry for support that proved crucial to the survival of the 6RAR company involved.¹⁷

Both aspects—catalyst and co-operation—were apparent when, late in 1966, American pressure for enhanced contributions in South Vietnam grew. The mid-December advice that Australia had decided that the Task Force should be 'substantially augmented', by supplementing the strength of units already committed and adding further personnel to headquarters and logistic elements, left the government in Wellington resigned to an increase in New Zealand's V Force as well. A failure to respond would be conspicuous, but at the same time the Australian decision also offered an opportunity to sell the idea of a further contribution to the New Zealand public as part of a coordinated Anzac action.

Alignment with Australia, it was recognised in Wellington, would also facilitate practical co-operation that would assist New Zealand in making a contribution. This was important because of the third primary influence on New Zealand's approach to the question of additional forces for South Vietnam—the limited means available. There were two main reasons for this incapacity. The first was New Zealand's relatively weak economic position, because of its small population, lack of raw materials, and narrowly focused economy based on trade with the United Kingdom in a limited range of products. A downturn in wool prices in early 1967 caused considerable difficulties.

This impacted in several ways relevant to the Vietnam decision. In particular, the government became even more reluctant than usual to spend foreign exchange on military commitments. Dollar expenditures were especially disliked. Any means of keeping the amount that needed to be spent to a minimum were regarded with favour, and association with the larger Australian force offered infra-structural savings, even if New Zealand always paid its way.

New Zealand's financial weakness—and the government's unwillingness to curtail the social security programme that swallowed a large proportion of government expenditure—meant that the armed forces that it was capable of sustaining were relatively limited. Traditionally, this problem had been overcome partly by borrowing equipment from the United Kingdom, partly by relying on non-regular forces. Small regular naval and air forces had been maintained. The Royal New Zealand Navy operated a small fleet of frigates, while the RNZAF's main strike arm was a squadron of Canberra bombers acquired in the late 1950s.

The Army was, until the late 1950s, based on the preparation of a Territorial Force based infantry division of citizen-soldiers on the Second World War pattern for deployment in the Middle East. To this end compulsory military training had been reintroduced in 1949 in the dying days of the first Labour government. This scheme, which provided for three months' training for all eighteen-year-old males, was abolished in 1958, shortly after Labour got back into power. Three years later the succeeding National administration led by Holyoake revived compulsory training in a more restricted form: under the National Service scheme 2000 men were balloted annually to undergo a training program essentially the same as that of the initial scheme. This was to provide a Territorial Force-based brigade group, with another on a lesser state of readiness, and a logistic support group. By this time, however, emphasis had shifted to maintaining the 750-strong Regular Force infantry battalion stationed in Malaya as part of the Commonwealth Strategic Reserve. Regular soldiers in New Zealand itself were serving in cadre positions in brigade group headquarters or units or in specialist corps rather than in units readily committable to Vietnam. The exception was the small 1st Ranger Squadron, NZ SAS.

The second fundamental reason for New Zealand's limited means of contributing in Vietnam was political. The government was resolutely opposed to the introduction of conscription for full-time service, as opposed to compulsory training, to broaden the manpower base available to the Army and increase its operational availability. Australia had taken this course in late 1964, and subsequently made conscripts liable for overseas service, a step that would lead to 17,000 of them serving in South Vietnam. Holyoake's government, correctly assessing the public mood, never showed any interest in attempting to move in this direction. New Zealanders in the 1960s were insufficiently imbued with a sense of clear and present danger to endorse such action, as they had done in both world wars.

With 1RNZIR seemingly unavailable because of its commitment to the Commonwealth Strategic Reserve, the Army's cupboard was therefore virtually bare when it came to consider an additional contribution to Vietnam in late 1966. To be sure, a special unit could have been formed in New Zealand, as had been done with 161 Battery in 1965, but this would have created major difficulties in sustaining both that battery and 1RNZIR. The recruitment of sufficient personnel for the battalion presented enough problems without introducing another competing unit.

One solution would have been to avoid the problem altogether—by contributing elements of the other two services. Such an approach was encouraged by the long-held assumption 'that forces of any type will be politically acceptable to our Allies'.¹⁸ Both the RNZN and RNZAF were anxious to get into the field, and both put forward options. The RNZN, for example, proposed deploying a frigate to serve with the US 7th Fleet or sending seamen to man American patrol craft. The main drawback of the former was the likely problems involved in a British-type frigate operating in an American naval environment (though the operations of HMAS *Vendetta* in 1969-70 would prove that these problems, which had of course been faced during the Pacific War of 1941-45, were not insurmountable). When for mainly cost reasons the New Zealand government indicated that it would not want a New Zealand frigate involved in shore bombardment, American interest in such a contribution fell away. Nor did the RNZAF's suggestion that New Zealand provide crews for Canberra bombers find much support among Cabinet Ministers reluctant to have New Zealand associated in any substantial way with the bombing campaign in South Vietnam, given the greater likelihood of inflicting civilian casualties in such operations.¹⁹ The likely cost in foreign exchange of these naval and air options was a further disincentive to the government.

From the outset most attention focused on the Army's capacity to provide a further unit, not least because it already had a unit in Vietnam. An Army contribution, it soon became evident, would also be cheaper than the other service alternatives and present fewer problems of logistic and other support. It also offered political advantages, in terms of the Anzac link, over the other services, whose units or personnel would have to operate more directly with the Americans.

Although consideration was given to the possibility of sending detachments of SAS, engineers or armoured personnel carriers from New Zealand, an infantry contribution was soon accepted as the most appropriate. The pressing need for infantry in South Vietnam had been made clear to New Zealand officers visiting the theatre. More importantly, a capacity to provide an infantry unit was apparent—if New Zealand could vary its commitment to the Commonwealth Strategic Reserve. There was a precedent in the deployment of the Strategic Reserve battalions in Borneo in 1965-66.

The possibility of using 1RNZIR as the basis of a New Zealand contribution in Vietnam had been discounted initially because it was already committed in Borneo, later because of the likely diplomatic and political issues obstacles. These latter were rooted in the overriding desire in Wellington to do nothing that might undermine British involvement in the region. Any variation in the arrangements, unless suggested by the British, as in the Borneo deployment, could serve as a pretext for a British withdrawal of their own forces from the Strategic Reserve for good. There was, too, the problem of the Malaysian government's attitude to the deployment in Vietnam of forces based on its soil. Finally, the Singapore government was also likely to be sensitive to the transit of New Zealand troops through the British base at Changi to Vietnam, if that conduit was used.

Despite these negative considerations, the possibility of using the forces in Malaya was brought to the foreground in December 1966. Impetus was provided by Holt's suggestion that the Australian and New Zealand battalions at Terendak might be rotated into Vietnam on six-month tours to provide a third battalion for the Task Force.²⁰ Such an arrangement offered several advantages for New Zealand: the battalion was already in the region, acclimatised and trained with the benefit of recent albeit relatively limited combat experience, and of a size that would lessen the problems of ensuring national identity. There had already been unofficial indications that a rotation along the lines proposed by Holt might be acceptable to the British military commanders in Malaysia.²¹ Although the idea was quickly dropped in Canberra—because of the possible effect on the British, the likely morale problems from injecting short-term personnel into the Task Force, and a belief that six-month tours would be too short to allow effective performance—the New Zealand authorities looked more closely at possible options for sending all or part of 1RNZIR to Vietnam. The Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak's 'surprisingly forthcoming response' to an Australian request to deploy its Canberra squadron from Butterworth air base in Malaya to South Vietnam seemed to indicate that Malaysian objections might not be a major obstacle to deploying 1RNZIR.²²

The idea of sending the whole of 1RNZIR to South Vietnam did not get very far. In the first place, New Zealand authorities accepted that, if it were committed on either a permanent or temporary basis, another battalion would have to be deployed to meet SEATO commitments. Otherwise New Zealand would be effectively withdrawing from the Strategic Reserve with possibly serious consequences regarding the United Kingdom's continuing presence. But finding such a battalion would present major problems: doubts about the legality of compelling National Servicemen to serve overseas ruled out using an existing Territorial Force battalion for the purpose, while recruiting a specially constituted battalion did not seem feasible in light of the problems being experienced in manning existing units overseas. Moreover, to sustain such a commitment a second, relief, battalion would have to be raised in New Zealand while the first was still in Malaya, causing 'acute accommodation problems'. Another drawback foreseen in such a scheme, especially if 1RNZIR went to Vietnam on a relatively short tour and dependants remained at Terendak, was the likelihood of marital problems if a battalion of unaccompanied men sent to Malaya (as had occurred when 1RNZIR went to Borneo leaving unaccompanied SAS personnel and battalion families in the camp). On the other hand, to hold a replacement battalion in New Zealand for dispatch to Malaya if and when needed was bound to lead to a decline in the efficiency of 28 Commonwealth Brigade because of its inability to exercise effectively. Moreover, any rapid deployment under such an arrangement would depend upon storing the battalion's equipment in theatre ahead of time, with consequent logistic problems.²³

Quite apart from the drawbacks of a replacement battalion, the deployment of 1RNZIR to South Vietnam permanently would also create practical and morale problems. The troops' tour of duty in South-east Asia would be reduced from 24 months to twelve, bringing major recruiting problems to sustain the unit. An annual turnover of 1400 men would be required to sustain the battalion on active service in South Vietnam, given an anticipated 60 per cent wastage rate. This was far above the existing enlistment rate. The families of 1RNZIR's married men at Terendak would have to return to New Zealand, posing accommodation problems. Furthermore, the troops had certain expectations about their service, not the least of which was that their two-year engagement would allow them to import a car to New Zealand at its end.

These negative considerations ensured that attention quickly focused on the possibility of providing a much smaller unit for Vietnam. There were indications that rotation of units from Terendak to South Vietnam would be acceptable to Canberra.²⁴ The New Zealand Chief of Defence Staff Lieutenant General LW (later Sir Leonard) Thornton had been assured by his Australian counterpart, General Sir John Wilton, that 1ATF would welcome a New Zealand company, would use it for more than just base protection duties, and 'would ensure it did not get given wrong or unsatisfactory tasks'.²⁵ There was a reasonable assumption that Australia would assist in the support of such a unit on the same basis as it did in the case of 161 Battery. Moreover, such a contribution, which could be sustained by sending successive companies, could be made without completely compromising 1RNZIR's position in the Commonwealth Strategic Reserve. All this left the Chief of the General Staff, Major General WS McKinnon, convinced that 'the company rotation plan would be by far the easiest'.²⁶

Holyoake accepted this advice. He was unmoved when the visiting Holt, early in February, expressed reluctance to see a New Zealand sub-unit withdrawn from the Strategic Reserve (perhaps fearing that this would open the way to American pressure for use of part or all of the Australian battalion as well). Nor was he swayed by Holt's pointed assertion that Australia had had no difficulty in using conscripts in South Vietnam.²⁷ On 20 February 1967 the Cabinet agreed in principle to the contribution of at least a company of 184 men (160 for the unit and 24 reinforcements).²⁸ This provided a firm basis for army-level talks with Australia with a view to firming up the proposal. The plan to insert a New Zealand company was not entirely straightforward. To operate with Australian battalions, standardisation would be necessary. Their similar historical approaches had not prevented a number of differences developing between the armies of the two countries. These related to unit size, composition, equipment, and standard operating procedures. A New Zealand company would have to conform with Australian practice in these areas. If the contribution were to be made in timely fashion, a degree of Australian help would also clearly be needed, especially to obtain the necessary equipment.

In the ensuing discussions, the Australians confirmed that they would provide logistic support on the same basis as for 161 Battery, and would provide clothing and personal equipment. The main outcome of the discussions was a substantial increase in the size of what would now be a company group. This was to accommodate a ten per cent supplement to Australian infantry companies in Vietnam over their war establishment of 123—1RNZIR had operated in Borneo with 90-man companies—31 men for an operational support element which would include a mortar section and an assault pioneer section, twenty men for logistic and administrative support, and 24 reinforcements.

The diplomatic formalities were also completed without serious difficulties. Both the British and Australian governments formally indicated their agreement to the proposed action.²⁹ When approached, Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Razak was at first most anxious about the implications of the deployment. 'After some cogitation, and with still undisguised qualms,' High Commissioner Hunter Wade reported to Wellington, 'he nevertheless finally said that of course Malaysia would not stand in New Zealand's way ... He gave the impression of agreeing to something that he did not at all like ...'³⁰ In order to allay Malaysian concerns, much emphasis was placed on the fact that the company, and the one that would replace it after six months, would comprise men whose engagements were ending and hence would return to Malaysia from South Vietnam only temporarily before proceeding to New Zealand.³¹ The Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew agreed that the deployment of the company could be made, with discretion, through Changi.³² The South Vietnamese government was the last of the interested parties to be informed.³³

With all bases covered, the Cabinet had little problem in agreeing, on 6 March 1967, to the addition of 210 men to 'V' Force, increasing its establishment from 150 to 360. This decision involved sending 40 personnel from New Zealand either to fill gaps in 'V' Company or to replace specialists in 1RNZIR.³⁴ To allay domestic concerns the government decided to match the combat offering with a small non-combatant contribution, as a result of which a joint services medical team left for South Vietnam in April.³⁵

While the troops selected for 'V' Company carried out specialist training from 1 April, a four-man engineer party went from New Zealand to prepare the company area in Nui Dat. Every effort was made to downplay the significance of the deployment from Terendak. 'V' Company ceased to be part of 28 Brigade when it left Terendak Camp on 8 May. It did not, however, completely sever links with Malaysia. It was intended that casualties would be evacuated to Terendak or the British Military Hospital in Singapore, and that deceased soldiers would be brought back to be buried at Terendak.³⁶

On arrival in Vietnam 'V' Company was attached initially to 6RAR, which was about to be relieved by 2RAR. It was already deployed in the field in the important Horseshoe position when 2RAR arrived on 30 May.³⁷ As that battalion's fifth rifle company, it settled in quickly, helped by the relatively quiescent conditions. Interviewed a few years afterwards about his experience in Vietnam, Mace 'stressed that these six months were a very quiet period with little of major importance occurring'.³⁸ It was not until early September that the company suffered its first, and only, fatal casualty—as a result of a mine explosion.³⁹

Well before the company's tour was completed, the provision of its replacement was complicated by the government's decision to make available a second infantry company in response to renewed American pressure for greater Allied assistance in South Vietnam. Direct approaches from President Johnson in July were reinforced when his envoys Clark Clifford and General Maxwell Taylor met with the New Zealand Cabinet in Wellington on 1 August 1967. Their message was clear: America's allies needed to do more. Clifford emphasised the importance of even a small increase by pointing out that 'one additional New Zealand soldier might produce fifty Americans'.⁴⁰ That Holyoake was resigned to a further commitment is revealed by his subsequent efforts to prepare the public for such an eventuality. He made a point of hinting that expansion of 'V' Force was under consideration and that New Zealand would not flinch from such action if necessary.⁴¹ Behind his stance lay recognition that the situation in the region had fundamentally altered since the decision to commit 'V' Company. Even before that unit had reached South Vietnam, Holyoake had been shocked, when meeting British Foreign Secretary George Brown on 18 April, to learn of plans to slash British force levels in Malaysia and Singapore by half by 1971 and to end the British presence altogether by the mid-1970s. Holyoake, 'with all the force at my command', urged a reconsideration of these plans, which fundamentally differed from assurances he had received as recently as February that any changes to the British presence would be no more than minor adjustments.⁴² The need to bolster the American resolve to stay in the region seemed to have been enhanced.

Once again New Zealand's decision on a Vietnam commitment was precipitated by Australian action. When Holyoake visited Canberra at the beginning of October 1967, he learned from Holt that Australia intended to provide an additional infantry battalion and some tanks. Holt indicated that he would make an announcement to this effect as soon as the Australian Parliament resumed sitting in about two weeks' time.⁴³ Holyoake's advisers wasted little time in pointing to the importance of co-ordinating any New Zealand decision with that of Australia. As Secretary of Foreign Affairs George taking pointed out, the appearance of a joint response would have political advantages; if, on the other hand, New Zealand announced its decision shortly after Australia, it 'could convey the impression that New Zealand was being dragged along in the wake of its larger allies'.⁴⁴ On 9 October the Cabinet agreed in principle to an additional contribution to the Allied effort in South Vietnam.⁴⁵ While External Affairs sought, unsuccessfully, to secure a delay in the announcement of the Australian decision so that Holyoake too could make his announcement in Parliament—New Zealand's parliamentary session was resuming a week later than Australia's—the military authorities found themselves in an urgent new consideration of potential contributions.

As in the previous decision, the options were limited. The operational capability of 1RNZIR had been severely affected by the dispatch of 'V' Company to South Vietnam: this commitment had effectively absorbed the capacity of two of the battalion's four rifle companies. To send another company would be to reduce 1RNZIR to a headquarters and about 300 men, rendering it essentially a training depot for the sub-units in South Vietnam. Major General RB Dawson, who had replaced McKinnon as CGS at the end of March, warned that this would not be a credible contribution to 28 Brigade.⁴⁶ Such a step might also complicate efforts to deal with the question of a continued Australian and New Zealand presence in Malaysia-Singapore following the projected British withdrawal, and perhaps even hasten plans for that withdrawal. Nor were the Australian military authorities keen on the removal of another company from 1RNZIR. When Thornton discussed the matter in Canberra in early October with Wilton and Australian CGS Lieutenant General Sir Thomas Daly, he found the idea 'not at first very warmly received', though they did agree in the end to support a further company on the same basis as 'V' Company.⁴⁷

On the other hand, sending another company was a convenient method of expanding New Zealand's commitment and relatively cheap. Together with an SAS detachment from New Zealand, it would cost about £122,000 to deploy and another £314,000 annually to maintain. As a surprisingly co-operative Treasury pointed out, this was not a large amount when considered in relation to the £7.7 million spent on New Zealand forces in Malaysia and South Vietnam overall. Considerations of economic diplomacy may have influenced the Treasury's stance 'It is assumed', the Secretary to the Treasury, Noel Davis, informed his Minister, 'that the utmost use will be made of any increased New Zealand contribution to Vietnam in future trade negotiations with the United States'.⁴⁸

When it met to consider New Zealand's response on 16 October 1967, the Cabinet quickly settled on the dispatch of another infantry company, despite the implications for 1RNZIR and the Commonwealth Strategic Reserve. To save money, it rejected the proposal to send an SAS detachment. The naval authorities at last secured some encouragement in their struggle to have a frigate sent to Vietnam, being authorised to open talks with their American counterparts on the possibility.⁴⁹ In the event, they soon ran up against the obstacle that the Americans regarded such assistance as having a relatively low priority. Naval hopes of a Vietnam effort were finally dashed.

New Zealand's decision to send another infantry company was announced at 4.30 pm on 17 October. This timing was carefully arranged to make it simultaneous with Holt's statement to the Australian Parliament, when it resumed for its afternoon sitting. There was a hint of the old competitive spirit in the attitude of officials in Wellington about the likely media response to the announcements in the United States, with fears being expressed that New Zealand's would be completely overshadowed or ignored. But, significantly, there was no attempt by Holyoake to steal a march on the Australians by getting New Zealand's decision out first—as had motivated Holyoake's predecessor Sidney Holland when ground force contributions for Korea were announced by both countries in July 1950. On that occasion Holland had rushed to beat Australia to the draw, achieving his goal thanks to the time difference between the two countries.⁵⁰ Overhanging the resolution of the Vietnam issue in 1967 was the need for Australia and New Zealand to find a solution to the problem posed by Britain's projected departure from the region. Provocative action on New Zealand's part would not have assisted this process. On the contrary, Holyoake had everything to gain by emphasising the Anzac context of New Zealand's Vietnam effort: his statement noted that the additional forces would serve 'as an integral part of the Australian Task Force', and referred to the two countries being 'as ever ready to stand together'.⁵¹ His own warm relations with Harold Holt were also significant. In any case, preemptive action might have drawn attention to the relative smallness of New Zealand's contribution. The United States was deploying another 40,000 troops, and Australia 1700, but New Zealand was offering a mere 150. These would bring New Zealand's overall strength in South Vietnam to 546, compared with the United States' 525,000 and Australia's 8000.

However it was announced, New Zealand's relatively meagre response was hardly likely to gain it any political leverage in the American capital, notwithstanding President Johnson's expressions of gratitude. Ambassador Frank Corner was resigned to the fact that 'we matter little at high levels in Washington, or are taken for granted, or both'.⁵² In London, the decision probably merely strengthened British resolve to withdraw from Southeast Asia, or eased the consciences of those who felt that New Zealand and Australia had been earlier misled about Britain intentions, though British officials 'determinedly nonreacted' to Holyoake's announcement.⁵³ On military grounds the British Commander-in-Chief, Far East, General Sir Michael Carver, thought that New Zealand was 'getting the worst of both worlds', since it would have neither an operationally effective unit in Malaysia nor a clearly identifiable New Zealand unit in South Vietnam.⁵⁴

Designated 'W' Company, the second New Zealand company went forward to South Vietnam in mid-December 1967, a month after the replacement company for V Company. Like the first, this second 'V' Company was committed on a six-month tour, as previously planned, but it was intended in future to send replacement companies on twelve-month tours. This would bring them into conformity with the twelve-month tour that 'W' Company embarked on.⁵⁵ This longer period of service was facilitated by the fact that most of 'W' Company was made up of men who had recently arrived at Terendak as part of the half-battalion replacement system then in place. In short, they were just beginning their 24-month period of engagement. While this facilitated their deployment for a longer period, it meant that they only had a few weeks to acclimatise before moving forward to Nui Dat,⁵⁶ several weeks' further training would be needed in South Vietnam before they were ready for operational duty.

The provision of 'W' Company opened the way to the formal integration of the New Zealand units with an Australian battalion. Initially, it was envisaged that 'W' Company would be attached to a different battalion (3RAR) to that with which 'V' Company was serving (2RAR),

but that eventually both companies would be brought together, probably in 3RAR in March 1968.⁵⁷ Almost immediately, this intention changed, and when it arrived at Nui Dat 'W' Company joined 'V' Company with 2RAR.

By this time agreement had been reached by the Australian and New Zealand army authorities that 2RAR should become an Anzac battalion. Thornton, in October, had put forward to Wilton and Daly the idea of a battalion of two Australian and two New Zealand companies. This made no headway, the Australian generals insisting that a five-company battalion 'would suit local tactical requirements'.⁵⁸ With such a structure the battalion could operate with four companies while leaving one company to protect the patrol base and supporting artillery unit. Behind the Australian generals' insistence on three Australian companies may also have been recognition that Thornton's preferred arrangement would probably open the way for New Zealand calls for command of the battalion to be rotated between Australian and New Zealand officers. It was intended that one of 2RAR's four Australian companies would be withdrawn about March 1968, allowing 'W' Company to be integrated into it. When 4RAR replaced 2RAR in mid-1968, it would take only three rifle companies to South Vietnam. New Zealand officers would fill a number of positions in the headquarters of the battalion, including that of second-in-command. Integration was complete apart from New Zealand national administration, for which a small New Zealand Component, 1ATF, was created and colocated with the battalion. The new Anzac unit, formally designated 2RAR/NZ(ANZAC),⁵⁹ came into being on 1 March 1968.

Although a pragmatic solution to New Zealand's problem of making an additional contribution, the arrangement did have some serious disadvantages. One was in the field of co-ordination. Creating a cohesive Anzac unit was rendered more difficult by the lack of opportunity to practise working together before deployment. New Zealand's units prepared for Vietnam in a different place from the Australian component of the battalion—in cases where the change over coincided with the commitment of a new RAR battalion—or joined one already involved in operations. The commander of the last 'V' Company concluded that the 'opportunity to train together would certainly have made a difference to that very important element of mutual understanding between the two parts of the Battalion'. He also noted that 'because of the tempo of operations in Vietnam, there was almost no time to get to know one another even socially'.⁶⁰ While officers, many of them graduates of Duntroon or Portsea, had few problems in fitting in with their Australian counterparts, there is some evidence that at lower levels the two nationalities may have found the path to a successful partnership less easy, especially in the early stages before mutual respect was engendered by shared battle experiences. A New Zealand commentator who visited South Vietnam in mid-1967 claimed to have found 'considerable bad blood between the two nationalities'. Resentment among some New Zealand troops at their treatment was, he suggested, exacerbated by their belief that they were professionally more competent than the mainly conscript Australian unit they were serving alongside.⁶¹ Australian taunts about New Zealand's tendency to operate on the cheap also caused ill-feeling: visiting Nui Dat in late 1967, PK Edmonds, the New Zealand Charge d'Affaires in Saigon, found some New Zealand other ranks 'inclined to be rankled by Australian comments to the effect that they are "cheap soldiers" and that the New Zealand authorities are not sufficiently concerned with them to avoid spoiling the ship for a ha'penny worth of tar'.⁶²

The biggest drawback of the arrangement from New Zealand's viewpoint was the fact that its effort in South Vietnam was largely submerged. This increased the Army's desire to raise New Zealand's contribution to a battalion as soon as circumstances permitted. The communist Tet Offensive launched on 30 January 1968 seemed to provide an opportunity. With the Americans under pressure, the advantages of making a 'spontaneous gesture of solidarity' were recognised in Wellington.⁶³ Dawson pressed for the dispatch of 1RNZIR's HQ and signals and mortars units to constitute a battalion, pointing to the 'great advantages of obtaining national identity', administrative benefits, and the fact that 'the morale of the New Zealand personnel serving in the Task Force would be immeasurably increased'.⁶⁴ Some indications had been received that 1ATF would bend over backwards to assist this process, even fleshing out a New Zealand battalion if necessary.⁶⁵ As ever the problem of finding the men without some form of compulsion proved an insuperable obstacle. David Thomson, the Minister of Defence, was at first tempted by the possibility of withdrawing 161 Battery to

provide the means, but soon lost interest when the likely time needed to negotiate such an outcome and, above all, the cost of a full battalion deployment became apparent.⁶⁶ By April 1968 the idea was effectively dead, ensuring that the pattern of infantry commitment established in 1967 would persist. Over the next three and a half years three further replacement 'V' Companies and three replacement 'W' Companies brought to nine in all the number of New Zealand infantry companies that served in South Vietnam with the Anzac battalion, the Australian component of which alternated between 2RAR, 4RAR, and 6RAR. 'W' Company was withdrawn in November 1970 and 'V' Company in December the following year.

New Zealand's commitment of infantry companies in South Vietnam in 1967 was reactive rather than proactive. It moved only when American pressure for contributions made a commitment unavoidable, not least because of likely Australian action. The government's lack of enthusiasm for the war, its unwillingness to bite the bullet of political unpopularity that the provision of a substantial force would entail, and its constant concern about the financial implications of any overseas effort—all ensured that New Zealand's effort in South Vietnam would be very limited. In doing anything at all, it depended on Australia's assistance and co-operation. The formation of the Anzac battalion reflected a warming of Anzac relations at a governmental level. Even if the arrangement may have caused problems for some of the New Zealand troops in the field, it was a successful response to the practical problems of deploying New Zealand sub-units in an unfamiliar environment. With concurrent British moves to withdraw from the Southeast Asian region undermining the traditional basis of New Zealand's defence policy, such co-operation in meeting military requirements augured well for the future, when Australia and New Zealand would face new challenges in ensuring their regional interests.

Endnotes

1. See Lieutenant Colonel R M Smith to HQ AFV, 10 May 1967, HQ NZV Force to Army HQ, Wellington, 15 May 1967, NZA C59/3, New Zealand Army Records, New Zealand Defence Force Headquarters, Wellington (hereinafter NZDFHQ).
2. COS(66)101, 'Manila Meeting on Vietnam—October 1966, Briefs for Chief of Defence Staff, Annex A, 17 October 1966, MD 23/4/1, Ministry of Defence Records, NZDFHQ.
3. On New Zealand's defence policy generally see Ian McGibbon, 'Forward Defence: the Southeast Asian Commitment', in Malcolm McKinnon (ed), *New Zealand in World Affairs*, vol II, 1957-1972 (Wellington: New Zealand Institute of International Affairs, 1991), 9-39.
4. DC1/65, 'New Zealand Defence Policy 1965-70', 26 February 1965, MD 57/3/5.
5. Ralph Mullins to Secretary of Foreign Affairs, 3 September 1970, PM 478/4/1, External Affairs Records, Archives New Zealand, Wellington (hereinafter ANZ).
6. Major General W S McKinnon, 'New Zealand Involvement in Vietnam', unpub typescript, nd, but c 1981 (copy in author's possession).
7. Frank Corner, 'ANZUS et cetera—June 1991', unpub typescript 11 (copy in the author's possession).
8. McKinnon, 'New Zealand Involvement in Vietnam', McKinnon recalled that the head of the Prime Minister's Department, A D McIntosh, had informed him of this reticence on Holyoake's part.
9. On New Zealand's decision see Roberto Rabel, 'We cannot afford to be left too far behind Australia': New Zealand's entry into the Vietnam War in May 1965', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, issue 32 (1999), <www.awm.gov.au/journal>.
10. David Dickens, 'New Zealand and the Vietnam War: Official Policy Advice to the Government 1960-1972' (PhD thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 1995), 238.
11. Note for File, by G D L White, 1 November 1966, PM 478/4/6, ANZ.
12. Dickens, 'New Zealand and the Vietnam War', 245. The National Party won 44 seats (down one on the previous election), the Labour Party retained its 35 seats, and the Social Credit Party took a seat from the National Party.
13. On this see Ian McGibbon, 'Australia-New Zealand Defence Relations to 1939', in Keith Sinclair (ed), *Tasman Relations: New Zealand and Australia, 1788-1988* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1987), 164-82.
14. See Ian McGibbon, 'ANZAXIS at War: Australian-New Zealand Relations During the Korean War', in Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey (eds), *The Korean War 1950-53: A Fifty Year Retrospective* (Canberra: Army History Unit, 2000), 27-41.
15. See Peter Edwards, *A Nation at War: Australian Politics, Society and Diplomacy during the Vietnam War 1965-1975* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, 1997), 144.
16. Ian McGibbon, 'New Zealand's Involvement in the Vietnamese War 1960-65'(unpub typescript, Ministry of Defence, 1974), 2-15.
17. See Ian McNeill, *To Long Tan: The Australian Army and the Vietnam War 1950-1966* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, 1993), 323, 373.
18. COS(66)101, 'Manila Meeting on Vietnam—October 1966, Briefs for Chief of Defence Staff, Annex B, 17 October 1966, MD 23/4/1, NZDFHQ.
19. They did, however, allow the participation of several New Zealand forward air controllers from December 1968.
20. Canberra to Wellington, 1131, 7 December 1966, Acting Secretary of External Affairs to Prime Minister, 14 December 1966, PM 478/4/6, ANZ.
21. See Minute by R H W [Wade], 21 November 1966, PM 478/4/6, ANZ reporting that the commander of 28 Commonwealth Brigade, Brigadier T D R McMeekin, had pointed out off the record that since he now had a Gurkha battalion under command the temporary absence of either of the Australian or New Zealand battalions would not present a problem in terms of meeting Commonwealth Strategic Reserve responsibilities.
22. Kuala Lumpur to Wellington, 876, 22 December 1966, PM 478/4/6, ANZ.
23. CGS to Minister of Defence, 30 January, 1 February 1967, MD 23/4/1, NZDFHQ.
24. See Canberra to Wellington, No 1167, 15 December 1966, MD 23/4/1, NZDFHQ.
25. Minute by Thornton, on CGS to Minister of Defence, 30 January 1967, MD 23/4/1, NZDFHQ.
26. CGS to Minister of Defence, 30 January 1967, MD 23/4/1, NZDFHQ.
27. Dickens, 'New Zealand and the Vietnam War', 252.
28. CM67/5/27, PM 478/4/6.
29. London to Wellington, 1031, 24 February 1967, Canberra to Wellington, 257, 24 February 1967, PM 478/4/6. On the Australian response see Minute by Defence Committee, 23 February 1967, and Cabinet Minute (Decision No 82) of same date, A4940, C4521, Cabinet Secretariat Records, National Archives of Australia, Canberra.
30. Kuala Lumpur to Wellington, 160, 28 February 1967, PM 478/4/6.
31. Wellington to Kuala Lumpur, 231, 8 March 1967, PM 478/4/6.
32. Singapore to Wellington, 115, 6 March 1967, PM 478/4/6.
33. Memorandum for Cabinet, 'Vietnam: Military Assistance', 3 March 1967, PM 478/4/6.
34. CM67/7/30, 8 March 1967, PM 478/4/6.
35. Dickens, 'New Zealand and the Vietnam War', 258.

36. See Major General COS, FARELF, 'Move of V Company Group', 31 March 1967, NZA C59/3.
37. Major K E Newman (ed), *The ANZAC Battalion: A Record of the Tour of 2nd Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment 1st Battalion, The Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment (The ANZAC Battalion) in South Vietnam, 1967-68* (Brookvale: 2RAR, 1968), vol I, 12.
38. John Henderson, 'ROH Interview with New Zealand Army Officers Who Have Served in Vietnam', unpublished typescript, Ministry of Defence, nd (c 1969), 2 (copy in author's possession).
39. Captain C E Brock, *A History of the First Battalion Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment* (Singapore: 1RNZIR, 1971), 10.1-2.
40. Edwards, *A Nation at War*, 152.
41. See, eg, *Dominion* (Wellington), 5 October 1967.
42. 'Record of Meeting ... 18 April 1967', NZ Ambassador, Washington, to Minister of External Affairs, Wellington, 19 April 1967, PM 434/8/1, ANZ.
43. 'Record of Discussions between the Australian and New Zealand Prime Ministers and Australian and New Zealand Officials: 2-3 October 1967', 3 October 1967, PM 478/4/6.
44. Secretary of External Affairs to Prime Minister, 6 October 1967, PM 478/4/6.
45. CM67/39/30, 10 October 1967, PM 478/4/6.
46. CGS to CDS, 20 September 1967, MD 23/4/1.
47. CDS to Minister of Defence, 6 October 1967, PM 478/4/6.
48. Secretary to Treasury to Minister of Finance, 11 October 1967, MD 23/4/1.
49. CM67/40/4, 18 October 1967, PM 478/4/6.
50. See Ian McGibbon, *New Zealand and the Korean War*, vol I, Politics and Diplomacy (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1992), 97-9.
51. Wellington to all Diplomatic Posts, C12, 17 October 1967, PM 478/4/6.
52. Washington to Wellington, 943, 3 November 1967, PM 478/4/6.
53. London to Wellington, 5074, 20 October 1967, PM 478/4/6.
54. Singapore to Wellington, 475, 17 October 1967, PM 478/4/6.
55. Deputy Secretary of Defence (Army) to Minister of Defence, 20 October 1967, MD 23/4/1.
56. Wellington to Singapore, No 617, 20 October 1967, MD 23/4/1.
57. DC(67)M20, 2 November 1967, MD 23/4/1.
58. CDS to Ministry of Defence, 6 October 1967, PM 478/4/6.
59. New Zealand had initially suggested '3RAR/1NZ', it agreed to the addition of '(ANZAC)' but later asked for the removal of the '1'.
60. Colonel Brian Monks, quoted in Jerry Taylor, *Last Out: 4RAR/NZ(ANZAC) Battalion's second tour in Vietnam* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2001), 80.
61. See *The Australian*, 26 September 1967.
62. NZ Chargé d'Affaires, Saigon, to Secretary of External Affairs, 3 January 1968, MD 23/4/1. See also Henderson, 'ROH Interview with New Zealand Army Officers Who Have Served in Vietnam', 55.
63. Memorandum for the Cabinet Defence Committee, 'Additional Forces for Vietnam' (forwarded by Secretary of Defence to Minister of Defence, 16 May 1968), MD 23/4/1.
64. CGS to CDS, 29 February 1968, MD 23/4/1.
65. Chargé d'Affaires, Saigon, to Secretary of External Affairs, 3 January 1968, MD 23/4/1.
66. Bangkok to Wellington, 109, 23 February 1968, Kuala Lumpur to Wellington, 29 February 1968, Minute by Thornton, 20 March 1968 on CGS to CDS, 29 February 1968, MD 23/4/1.