

THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY AND THE VIETNAM WAR 1962-1972

THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY AND THE VIETNAM WAR IN RETROSPECT

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Introduction

Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War was predominantly shaped by the experience of operations conducted by its Army. At the organisational level, the Department of Defence had only a general oversight of operations and the joint arrangements resulting in the creation of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) had yet to be made.¹ The Australian troops that were committed to Vietnam were predominantly employed in a counterinsurgency role or were engaged with North Vietnamese main force troops fighting a very unconventional campaign. It was a war that emphasised the importance of land power, close combat and a human presence on the battlefield. It was also a war that was waged at the operational level. Operations were conducted as a minor part of a greater multinational effort, not to achieve an immediate strategic outcome. Australian forces waged a very competent series of campaigns as a part of the 30-year long war to prevent the communist take-over of Indochina. However, there was no question that the Australian contribution would be decisive, or even that it would alter the course of the war one jot.

Furthermore, the absence of a clear strategic purpose to the attritional conflict that developed in the latter half of the 1960s subjected the Army's efforts to widespread public criticism. In the aftermath of the war, the confusion over the role played by the Army caused it to be marginalised as a tool of national security policy. As a result of the strategic reassessments that followed the war, it was the Army that suffered the most from cuts to defence and it lost many of its functions. More importantly, it failed to develop new capabilities. Australia's ability to project land power has been diminished ever since. To understand Australia's strategic situation today, it is necessary to examine the consequences of the war for Australia's land forces.

Australia's role in the Vietnam War represented the longest involvement in a single conflict that Australian forces have been required to sustain. Approximately 50,000 Australians served in Vietnam between 1962 and 1973 and for more than a decade Australia's military resources were devoted to sustaining this effort. The task of fighting a counter-insurgency campaign in South Vietnam shaped Australian military planning for more than a generation; its influence is still felt 30 years later. The immediate post-Vietnam period saw a shift in strategic thinking from the concept of forward defence to a policy focused on the territorial defence of Australia. Working backwards from the end of the Australian Army's involvement in the war, this essay analyses the influence of the Vietnam experience on Army planning. It focuses on the strategic, operational and tactical consequences of Australia's ten-year war.

Reading (and Misreading) the 'Lessons' of Australia's Role in Vietnam

For those who study such things, the generally high esteem that the ADF enjoys in the eyes of the Australian public, following its successful role in helping establish peace and security in East Timor, is somewhat ironic. The popularity of the Services marks the end of a period of 30 years during which the prevailing attitude to the military was at best indifference and which, more often, questioned the need for the continuing existence of an Australian war-fighting capacity. Since the end of the Cold War, the Australian Defence Force has been involved in an escalating tempo of military operations ranging from Somalia, Rwanda, Cambodia, and the Gulf to Bougainville, the Solomons, Afghanistan and, most notably, East Timor. Most of these operations have required a substantial land force component. Australian troops are, once again, serving in an expeditionary capacity overseas and have made a significant contribution to regional security. The conditions of insecurity arising from the War on Terrorism appear to

guarantee that Australian troops will continue to serve—in coalition with other military forces—in regional and extra-regional theatres. The era of strategic paralysis that followed Vietnam appears to be ending, but the generation of policy-makers who emerged in the aftermath of the war need reminding that the latter stages of Cold War stasis were the exception in Australia's strategic circumstances. Both before President Nixon proclaimed the Guam Doctrine and since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the international scene was dominated by conditions of protean insecurity. In the 1950s and 1960s Australia needed agile, deployable and effective land forces to serve its national interests in cooperation with other states that shared those interests. That need has reemerged and it is no longer possible to determine national security policy by reference to a populist misreading of the lessons of Vietnam.

After Vietnam, successive Australian governments concentrated the efforts of the defence force on the territorial defence of Australia, a trend that long-time Indochina correspondent Denis Warner described as 'a retreat rather than an advance in Australia's relations with Asia'.² That policy is now moribund, though its partisans continue to fight a rear-guard action. The Minister for Defence, Senator Robert Hill, recently spelled out the reality of Australia's current strategic situation in a speech at the Australian Defence College. In that speech, he concluded that the:

defence of Australia and its interests does not stop at the edge of the air-sea gap. It probably never made sense to conceptualise our security interests as a series of diminishing concentric circles around our coastline, but it certainly does not do so now. We are seeing a fundamental change to the notion that our security responsibilities are confined largely to our own region. The ADF is both more likely to be deployed and increasingly likely to be deployed well beyond Australia.³

In strategic terms, the Minister's statement reflects a dramatic shift in Australian policy and marks the end of the negative legacy of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War. This essay considers some aspects of the nature of that legacy as well as the reasons that the debacle in Vietnam limited our national strategic vision.

Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War ended up becoming deeply unpopular with the broader Australian community. This fact, together with the slurs heaped on those who were sent to fight the war, has served to disguise the fact that the defence forces were also deeply wounded by the war. As the war progressed those who fought it were increasingly the subject of sustained attack from a variety of groups in society. The antipathy towards the Army that arose from the war was to last for more than a generation. This hostility was particularly evident in the new left movements in the universities and in the Trade Unions.⁴ In the current atmosphere of almost general support for the efforts of the ADF, it is troubling to remember that prior to the 1971 ANZAC Day parade, the Melbourne Shrine was defaced with anti-war slogans and other demonstrations targeted the veterans of earlier wars. Rejection of the military continued to be a feature of the post-war period. The Army drew particular obloquy during the latter 1970s and early 1980s and—in deep contrast with the situation today—veterans marching in ANZAC Day parades were abused and even assaulted by protestors. At the 1984 parade in Melbourne, the Women against Rape in War and the Anti-Anzac Day Collective attempted to disrupt the march and assaulted veterans and march organisers. As an institution, the Army responded by turning in on itself and losing its previously broad base within Australian society. Within a few years of the end of its involvement in Vietnam, which coincided with the end of the National Service scheme, the Army had become a stranger to the society it existed to serve.

At the national strategic level, in the political climate that emerged after Australia withdrew its combat forces from Vietnam, the defence forces were marginalised as an instrument of state power and almost became an irrelevance. The confusion surrounding Australian involvement in the war at the time that it occurred, combined with the misapprehensions and mythologies that rapidly developed in its wake, resulted in a short-term and ideologically driven national security policy. National memories of the war and the role that Australia's Army played in it are often quite bizarre or are imported from the (quite distinct) American experience. The

popular confusion that arose from the war has shaped public and political attitudes to the use of military power. As the editors of the 1991 book *Vietnam Days: Australia and the impact of Vietnam* concluded, the various memories of the war 'are indicative of a superficial appeal to older and largely unquestioned myths, masking a profound and damaging inconclusion.⁵ The assumptions that underlay that policy continue to influence some schools of Australian strategic thought today—though the harsh realities of the world since September 11 have forced a re-evaluation of Australia's defensive and insular security philosophy.

Quite apart from the vexed issues of whether Australian involvement in the war can be justified and whether it was fought in the right way, there can be no doubt that the Australian Government failed to achieve the objectives it sought to achieve by going into the war. The main aim of the Menzies Government in committing troops was to build credit in the alliance with the United States in the expectation that it would remain committed to the region and return the compliment should Australia require assistance in the future.⁶ In the context of the Cold War and given Australia's limited military resources, this was not an unreasonable objective. What actually happened was that the failure of United States' policy in Vietnam led to its partial disengagement from the region and the promulgation of the Guam Doctrine. Stung by American losses in Vietnam, President Nixon made it clear that allies such as Australia had primary responsibility for their own security in regional conflicts.⁷ After the Liberal Government withdrew the Task Force from Vietnam, it responded to the Guam Doctrine with a defence policy that emphasised self-reliance; it had no other choice.⁸ However, within a year the Whitlam Government took that doctrine and used it to emasculate the Services and to limit national security policy to a narrow conception of territorial defence. The chief victim of the isolationist policy of those years was the Army. From being an active tool of national policy, heavily engaged in promoting regional peace and stability, it became Australia's third line of defence, to be called upon only if the Air Force and Navy had failed to block the Air-Sea-Land gap to Australia's north.⁹

With the end of National Service, the number of soldiers on full-time service shrank from 44,500 (including National Servicemen) to 29,000. By June 1973 the available Field force only numbered 9700—hardly the basis to mount, sustain and rotate the deployment of anything larger than a battalion-sized force on operations.¹⁰ In fact, until the deployment to East Timor in September 1999, the only overseas deployment of any size was of a battalion group to Somalia in 1993—and then only for three months. Despite a small increase in numbers in the late 1970s and early 1990s, the strength of the Army has remained at lower than Vietnam War levels since 1993. The size of the Army currently stands at approximately 25,500 and the available combat component of the Army currently stands at 17,000. As a 'tooth to tail' ratio, this is an impressive figure. However, this would not provide a basis for successive rotations in the event of the Army being called upon to mount and sustain another operation on the scale of the East Timor commitment. Not all troops are available at once, as one third of the force may be recovering from their last rotation while another third is preparing for the next deployment. At the same time, members have to fit in professional development training and perhaps even spend some time on leave with their families. When the Army was called upon to mount and sustain land operations in East Timor, it was open to question whether it could meet the bidding of government. It did so, but whether it could have done so while conducting operations at anything more than a low level still remains open to question.¹¹ Since Vietnam, Australia has lost its capacity to field land forces for anything other than low-level operations or as a very minor part of a larger coalition. The loss of that capability is the product of the narrowing of Australia's strategic vision in the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

The Strategic Consequences of Operations in Vietnam

The Australian Army's role in Vietnam was an unusual one—unprecedented in many ways—and it reflected the circumstances that would result in this becoming the most unpopular of all the conflicts in which it had been involved. As Robert Hall, a Vietnam veteran and author of *Combat Battalion*, concluded:

By 1969 the best commanders—at Task force and COMAFV level—were those who understood that the war was a lost cause. They saw Australia's involvement for what it was: a diplomatic gesture rather than a military necessity. They conducted operations accordingly, keeping casualties as low as possible while aiming to achieve limited military goals.¹²

The awareness that the objectives of the war did not match the manner in which it was being waged was not confined to the theatre of operations. In 1973, the Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant General Sir Mervyn Brogan, concluded that:

[The] US and other Free World countries including Australia as democratic nations have been fighting for the freedom of a people but have done so with one hand tied behind their backs. There is no doubt that Clausewitz would turn in his grave at this approach to war and would probably agree ... that in these circumstances, militarily, it was an unwinnable war.¹³

In the two decades of its existence, this was not the Regular Army's first limited war. Australian troops had served as a minor part of the United Nations coalition in Korea. They had also been involved in counter-insurgency warfare in the Malayan Emergency and in Confrontation with Indonesia between 1962 and 1966. These conflicts can be characterised as having a collective security component. In Korea, Australian troops fought as a part of a UN force within a Commonwealth Brigade. In Malaya and during Confrontation, as a part of the Commonwealth forces, they contributed to counterinsurgency operations to assist Malaysia in its passage to independence and to assure its security after independence occurred.

What made the involvement in Vietnam different was that there was no historical link to Indochina and Australian interests were not directly involved. At the level of strategic policy development there was considerable concern at the spread of revolutionary communist movements within the region. However, in this instance Australian troops were not fighting to prevent communism from reaching Australia. Malaysia, New Guinea and Indonesia were more proximate to Australian national security. Australia's contribution to America's war effort in Vietnam was driven by the desire to build up credit in its security relationship with it.¹⁴ Had the Australian commitment remained low-level and not involved conscripted soldiers, it is likely that it would have passed without much comment in Australia as previous operations had done. However, the operation came to involve National Servicemen; the commitment escalated to consume most-of the Army's efforts (to say nothing of the other services); and the casualties in the nasty little microcosm of a war in Phuoc Tuy Province continued to mount. The Army's involvement in the war reflected the classic conundrum facing a junior coalition partner that was sacrificing its blood and its treasure but remained impotent in a strategic sense. That no immediate national interests were involved, as well as the fact that the Government had not identified an exit strategy, made it inevitable that the troops would have to be withdrawn at some stage.

Quite apart from the operational experience of involvement in the war, both the Army and Australian society as a whole were strongly affected by the dilemmas arising from a limited commitment as a junior ally of the United States. Australia suffered some 500 deaths over a ten-year involvement in the war. While these figures were small in proportion to American casualties, they had a significant impact in Australia, particularly as 202 of the dead were conscripts.¹⁵ For the first few years of the war, the Australian commitment enjoyed bipartisan political support within Parliament. The Army's initial deployment to Vietnam of a regular army training team went almost unnoticed—counter-insurgency operations in Southeast Asia were hardly new, and beside, these troops were professionals. With the commitment of infantry battalions, the interest of the general community became more directly engaged. By the late 1960s opposition to the war mounted, mirroring the anti-war movement in America. The Australian involvement had an extra dimension in that while the Army had a clear vision of its role in Phuoc Tuy Province, it had no real influence on the overall course of the war. It has been estimated that, at the peak of the United States' commitment of forces, the Australian contribution represented less than 1.5 per cent of the overall military effort.¹⁶ With no end to

the war in sight and no decisive outcome likely, it is not surprising that public opinion helped drive the decision of the Government to bring the Task Force home in 1971. The training team followed a year later.¹⁷ It should not be assumed that the Government gave in to anti-war sentiment. It is often forgotten that the Australian decision to withdraw its forces was not made in a vacuum. President Nixon's policy of 'Vietnamisation' was well advanced in 1971 and over 400,000 US troops had been brought home by the time the Australian Task Force left.¹⁸

Australia had entered the war to buttress its alliance relationship with the US. What is more, fighting communist subversion in Southeast Asia was consistent with its longstanding doctrine of Forward Defence. However, the government then failed to follow through on its commitment. It adopted a surprisingly passive approach to exploiting its investment of troops. In his work on higher command during the war, David Horner pointed out that:

[t]here is no evidence that the Australian government took the opportunity ... to question the military conduct of the war, either at the grand strategic level or at the level of operational policy within Vietnam. Certainly the Australian contribution was so small in relation to the Americans' that we could hardly have expected much say in the running of the war, but consideration could have been given to gaining the maximum political influence from the nature of our contribution ... In the absence of direction from Canberra respective commanders of the Australian Force and 1ATF [First Australian Task Force] made decisions as they saw fit within the framework of the initial directive.¹⁹

The Vietnam experience demonstrated that in a complex security environment the commitment of Australian land forces requires a clear political vision of how they will be employed and for what purpose. That did not occur in this case. Any coalition relationship must be founded on clear understandings at the highest level. As Donald Rumsfeld, the US Secretary of Defense, recently pointed out in the context of the War on Terrorism, coalitions are important but the mission must determine the coalition and not the other way around.²⁰ The lesson cuts both ways—it is not enough for a major power to throw resources and troops into a conflict in the expectation that its military might will prevail and that lesser partners simply provide another flag on the ground to bolster the perceived legitimacy of the operation. On the other hand, junior partners have a positive responsibility, both to their domestic constituencies and to the mission in which they are investing their young men, to ensure that their efforts are not wasted. Australia's war in Vietnam demonstrated that it could not make an open-ended commitment to a US-led coalition—particularly one involving land operations where the possibility of suffering casualties was high. The political dimension of combined operations not only involves the government and the military, but ultimately the electorate as well.

The most significant strategic consequence of the war was that it facilitated the Whitlam Government's abandonment of the long-standing policy of 'Forward Defence' that had prevailed during the period of the Liberal ascendancy during the 1950s and 1960s. The realities imposed by the adoption of the Guam Doctrine had already led to a significant re-assessment of this doctrine. In March 1972 David Fairbairn, the Minister for Defence in the McMahon Liberal Government, tabled the Department of Defence's *Australian Defence Review* in Parliament. While accepting the need for greater self-reliance, the review reiterated the importance of the defence force continuing to make an active contribution to regional stability. It rejected a formulaic approach to defence policy and held that:

[t]he best defence of Australia's interests is seen to go beyond the defence of Australian territory alone. It calls for military capability, evident to other countries, to project Australian strength beyond the continental boundaries. In this view Australian security would be best promoted if, drawing on increasingly self-reliant military strength, we continue to recognise and support the security interests which we share with those who are a part of our special strategic environment. This implies a need to select carefully what we are capable of and what serves to strengthen our friends in that environment.²¹

While stressing that Australia would need to be more self-reliant, the review reflected the fact that President Nixon's Guam Doctrine did not represent total disengagement from the region. In fact, it contained guarantees that the United States would provide military and economic assistance to its allies if they were attacked. Accordingly, 'greater self-reliance' was interpreted to mean that Australia would not rely on its allies for integral support but would build increased self-sufficiency in respect of strategic lift, reconnaissance, artillery, air strike and sea control.²²

As self-reliance was a concept that had been introduced by the Liberal Government, it does not figure at all in Labor Party policy either before or after the 1972 Federal election.²³ Instead the main focus of Labor policy was the territorial defence of Australia from foreign incursions. In May 1973, Lance Barnard, the Defence Minister in the Labor Government, announced to Parliament:

We are less apprehensive concerning the social and political changes that are taking place in the environment to our north, and Australia will no longer concern itself with military arrangements for the mobilisation of force to intervene simply because of the prospect for change. The Government favours programmes of political conciliation and cooperation rather than military intervention.²⁴

Consequently, not only was the Army reduced in size but it lost a substantial element of its reason for existence. Lance Barnard's announcement that a 'Labor Government would give effect to the overwhelming feeling in the ranks of its members and supporters that it is no longer appropriate for Australian troops to be stationed on the ground in South East Asia', was an assertion of an undeniably isolationist stance. That policy deprived Australia of the main plank of its security engagement in the region and minimised the ability of the defence forces to help shape regional security for many years to come.²⁵

It is instructive to follow the development of the notion of Australian defence self-reliance. From its origins as an operational concept, it evolved into a strategic imperative. The 1976 Defence White Paper, which was commissioned by the Whitlam Labor Government but released by its Liberal successor, asserted the need for increased self-reliance but accepted that:

[o]ur alliance with the US gives substantial grounds for confidence that in the event of a fundamental threat to Australians security, US military support would be forthcoming. However, even though our security may be ultimately dependent on US support, we owe it to ourselves to be able to mount a national defence effort that would maximise the risks and costs of any aggression.²⁶

The next White Paper, titled *The Defence of Australia* and released in 1987, claimed that its predecessor had 'failed to give substance or direction to the concept' of defence self-reliance.²⁷ *The Defence of Australia* held that 'Australia must have the military capability to prevent an enemy attacking us successfully in our sea and air approaches, gaining a foothold on our territory, or extracting political concessions through the use of military force'.²⁸ This policy required a 'force-in-being to defeat any challenge to our sovereignty and specific capabilities to respond effectively to attacks within our area of direct military interest'.²⁹ For the Army this meant that its role was effectively limited to deployment within 'Australia and its territories'.³⁰

Self-reliance began as a sensible way of maximising the potential of Australian forces deployed on operations. It became the cornerstone of national strategic policy. Without a very clear idea of what the lessons of Vietnam were, two generations of policy-makers were at least convinced that there would be 'no more Vietnams'—whatever that meant. A sound idea that was born of operational experience and strategic reality became, in turn, an ideological aspiration and an institutional truth. The original concept did not suggest, as it has come to mean, that Australia felt that it was possible 'to defend Australia without relying on the combat forces of other countries'—a laudable but perhaps impossibly ambitious aim.³¹ The idea of strategic self-reliance was marginally tenable in the period of Cold War bi-polar deadlock that

followed the disengagement of the United States from Vietnam. In the era of protean insecurity that has followed the end of the Cold War, self-reliance has lost all meaning. In a globalised world, states need to provide for their individual security by taking collective action. Vietnam provided an object lesson in how not to manage an alliance relationship with a great and powerful ally, but the policies that emerged in the aftermath of the war had a negative impact on the Army's capacity to conduct operations in anything but the most limited geographical area. Throughout the post-Vietnam era, the unspoken guarantee of Australian security continued to be that in a global conflict 'US support would be forthcoming'. In the meantime, the Army lost its ability to mobilise, deploy and sustain combat operations in support of identified national interests—wherever those interests might be found.

The Operational Consequences of the War

A great deal has been written about the disillusionment of the junior and middle rank levels of the US Army's officer corps during the Vietnam War and the lessons that they have since carried into their doctrine for post-Cold War operations. Colin Powell's critical assessments of the US military role in Vietnam have been particularly influential in forging a more focused use of American military power.³² Although the officers that Australia sent to Vietnam had no influence on the military-strategic prosecution of the war, they garnered significant operational experience. Unlike the Americans, they could not blame their government for the course that the war took. Instead, they bore the heavy responsibility for conducting operations, knowing that the sacrifices that they and their men made were largely tokenistic.

Writing about the commanding officer and the majors within his own battalion, 8RAR, Bob Hall pointed out:

They provided a stable, experienced platform on which the cohesion and professionalism of the battalion would rest. Each man's career was strongly oriented towards Australia's region, particularly Southeast Asia. Of these nine officers, all had previous service somewhere in the region. Eight had served in Malaya (or Malaysia) and four had already served in South Vietnam. Three ... had served in other parts of the region including Sarawak, Sabah, Brunei, Borneo and Cambodia. Five had served in Papua New Guinea where, if they had not been at war, they were at least familiarised with the difficulties of jungle operations in areas with poor infrastructure. The professional orientation of these men was towards the conduct of counter-revolutionary war in South East Asia.³³

These were professional soldiers whose previous experience had been in small scale operations and who had served with the reasonable expectation that their work might make a difference in the complex security situation of the era. In Vietnam, the rapid American build-up from 1965 dwarfed the scale of the Australian commitment. There was no question that the Australian Task Force would make a significant difference in the outcome of the war. As operations in Phuoc Tuy Province could not be conducted in isolation, the Australians could not even segregate their own security situation from the rest of the war. It was thus impossible to devise a campaign plan that would win a decisive victory, though the conduct of operations by the Task Force effectively constituted a campaign in Phuoc Tuy Province.³⁴ Instead of seeing their operational focus driven by mission objectives, the Australians witnessed what former officer and defence commentator, Peter Young, described as:

a sorry unmilitary, unplanned, piece-meal build-up which bore little or no relevance to military needs—a helter-skelter political build-up ... complete with the statutory assorted persons and a succession of commanders committed to a policy of optimism and the avoidance of casualties.³⁵

Commenting after the announcement of the troop withdrawal, Young argued that: '[i]n the combat commands they knew better than anyone else the realities behind the bullshit about winning the war, the myth of Vietnamisation and the hidden inadequacies of the force'.³⁶ Young knew what he was talking about. As a lieutenant, he had been a member of the Australian Army Training Team (AATT) when it was first deployed to Vietnam in 1962, and

later worked within the American intelligence community in Vietnam. As a major, he served as the assistant military attache in Saigon. Denis Warner records that as an intelligence 'insider'. Young forecast the Tet Offensive of early 1968 and had his assessment suppressed by the Australian Embassy.³⁷ The Vietnam War produced a number of officers—Young and Serong among them—who had an instinctive grasp at the operational level of what this war was all about. What is remarkable, is that outside the limited pool of professional military historians, most other Australian historians have shown little interest in what the Army thought about the war. Given that the soldiers were the ones who fought it, and who learned the lessons of coalition partnership the hard way, it might be a good idea. Without a balanced vision of Australia's role in the conflict, what is taught in our schools and universities is likely to remain frozen in a time-warp dating back to the passionate, but naive, ideological positions that many academics adopted during the late 1960s.

Despite the failure to make the most of the operational experience built up by those with the most immediate involvement in the war, the experience acquired by the Army provided a potent stimulus for professional and intellectual engagement with the problems of counter-insurgency warfare. Richard Bushby, a serving Army officer, has published a monograph demonstrating that during the period of the war, soldiers and officers wrote a large number of articles for professional publications such as the *Australian Army Journal* and *Australian Infantry*. Many of these articles were republished in military journals around the world. Bushby concluded that this activity revealed 'an active practical and intellectual interest in tactics and doctrine, which was evident from the bottom of the army to its top'.³⁸ With a bright, experienced and educated officer corps, the Vietnam years witnessed a higher level of professional engagement with the problems of waging war than had ever been seen in the Army before—and probably since. In the years following the war, the opportunities for Army officers to provide successive governments with military-strategic and professional operational advice became increasingly marginalised. In 1974, the establishment of a bureaucratic 'diarchy' within the Department of Defence saw many of the professional roles of the military taken over by generalist public servants.³⁹ The task of preparing for war was overtaken by the responsibility of preparing for the self-reliant defence of Australia. Given the extreme improbability of such an eventuality—short of a global nuclear conflagration—the bureaucracy settled into the convenient routine of administering a peacetime army. For their part, burnt by the experience of Vietnam, the thinkers within the Army learnt that it did not matter what they knew if that knowledge did not fit with the prevailing bureaucratic, political or ideological orthodoxies. Consequently, since the end of the Vietnam War, the intellectual climate within the Army has been predominantly 'mechanistic, materialist and narrowly functional' and (with a few notable exceptions) most officers have not thought it worth establishing an intellectual approach to their trade.⁴⁰

The years that followed the war saw considerable disenchantment and confusion within the Army. Reared on the digger tradition, many soldiers were surprised and dismayed on returning home to find that large sections of Australian society rejected them. Unsubstantiated claims that the Australians had committed atrocities and were 'baby-killers', combined with harassment of military families, served to alienate members of the defence force from the wider community.⁴¹ Some of those involved in the moratorium movement in Australia have since had the good grace to be uncomfortable about their treatment of their soldiers, particularly once the details of the North Vietnamese conducted massacres, re-education camps and ethnic cleansing emerged.⁴² Denis Warner has since described how disinformation campaigns sponsored by Dr Jim Cairns's Congress for International Disarmament and the Soviet-sponsored World Peace Council helped shape public opinion in Australia.⁴³ However, at this time, the military was unprepared to protect itself and its members against what has since come to be known as 'Information Operations'. The impact of the anti-war rhetoric alienated the Army from the community for a generation.

On serving out their commitment in the Army, many National Servicemen simply re-entered the community and put Vietnam behind them. From a psychological point of view, many of these veterans suffered the most because they lacked the support and companionship that their regular counterparts continued to experience. After National service concluded, the restoration of an all-volunteer force enabled the institution to temporarily pull back from the broader society that had so evidently rejected it. The Regular Army turned in on itself and

became something of a time capsule frozen in the early 1970s—over a decade later, you could encounter non-commissioned officers in civilian attire with the bell bottom trousers, wide lapels and sideburns that had been popular in their youth. They did not get out much. The divisions prompted by the war also exacerbated pre-existing tensions within the Army. As late as the early 1980s, University Regiment members attending courses at Battle Wing, Canungra, Puckapunyal and the Infantry Centre at Singleton met with considerable hostility because 'they'—students and academics—had been responsible for the ostracism of the Army.⁴⁴

In the years after the withdrawal of Australian forces, the pages of the *Army Journal* reflected the concern that the Army might be seen as irrelevant under the new strategic guidance which focussed on the defence of the air-sea gap to Australia's north. The joke ran that in the unlikely event of an attempted invasion, the role of the Army was to bayonet the survivors who struggled ashore after the Navy and Air Force had defeated them. One very experienced officer concluded:

The Australian Army now stands at the threshold of a decade or two of minimum military activity and practically the whole force is back on the continent, and likely to remain so. There is today in the public mind a questioning of what the Army is all about, and a doubling that the Army is doing a fair day's work for a fair day's pay. After all, they (the troops) are all home, they have no defenceless Asians to knock about, what do they do all day? ... Try giving the ordinary man in the street the stock answer that we are training for war and he will give you - the stock reply, ' You are joking'...⁴⁵

It is hard to overstate the importance of political guidance in a democracy on the posture adopted by the armed forces. In the years following the withdrawal from Vietnam, it was made clear to the Services that 'political conciliation and cooperation' would supplant the military option in enhancing Australia's regional security.⁴⁶ On assuming power in 1972, the Labor Party brought with it a palpable air of discomfort with things military as well as a particularly idealist philosophy. While still in opposition. Lance Barnard wrote:

For Democratic Socialists, defence policy must invariably seem a frustrating and negative area. Spending on defence does not build up social capital. It is opposed to the fundamental principles and aspirations of all socialist theory. Defence planning is contingency planning and contingency planning is inherently wasteful because the premises on which it is based may never arise.⁴⁷

In the same publication, Barnard proposed that the role of the military needed to be changed to carry out what he called 'PUMF—the Peaceful Use of Military Forces'.⁴⁸ This concept involved the military providing manpower to carry out aid programs, engineering works, health and educational programs and relief work in the community. On assuming power, the Labor Government set about restructuring the Army for the defence of Australia—a risk that the Government itself assessed as 'remote'.⁴⁹ The involvement in Vietnam was written off as having 'represented an exaggerated concern with ideological conflict far from our own shores and was wrong in itself'.⁵⁰ Apparently, Australia's commitment to its ideological value system—most notably the right to freedom from totalitarian oppression—waned the further one travelled from its shores. The defence establishment took this guidance to heart, and the 1976 Defence White Paper confirmed the new orthodoxy that Australia's forces would no longer be developed and trained to fight in coalitions overseas.⁵¹

Reflecting on the loss of a warfighting focus that resulted from the end of the commitment to Vietnam, one young officer, who graduated from the Royal Military College in 1971, would write five years later in the *Army Journal*:

Despite the generalities that persist in all military curricula, our out-of-class association with military personalities and events was ALL Vietnam ... during our final year we came to realise that we would miss out. Vietnam was a dead duck; our military future seemed dull and unexciting; and those who aspired to the 'heroic commander' motif of military life had little chance of winning their spurs at the junior commander level in combat.⁵²

One of the joys of reading history is that you get to see how things actually turned out. In 1971, those young officers with an eye to the future concluded that 'if we have no violence to manage then one could at least study and learn organisational management'.⁵³ At the Royal Military College, many graduating cadets changed their preferences for career opportunities within the Army. Fewer wanted to serve in the Arms Corps—infantry, armour, artillery and the engineers—and more wanted to serve in the services. Training for combat might not be a good career move in an army with no war to fight, but management experience could be carried into a civilian career. Writing five years later, the young officer, by now a captain, conceded that he and his cohort had perhaps over-reacted—he had already served overseas in Papua New Guinea and as a United Nations Military Observer in Kashmir. However, the rapid change in defence policy had come as something of a shock. The Army had undergone an abrupt change in direction and in its own eyes, at least, had lost the operational focus that was a primary justification for its existence.

This officer's career was to come full-circle. Captain Mike Smith's career peaked with the rank of Major General and the deputy command of the multinational United Nations peacekeeping force in East Timor. Prior to taking up that appointment, as Director General East Timor in Defence Headquarters and as head of the International Force East Timor (INTERFET) liaison staff in the Department of Peacekeeping Operations at United Nations Headquarters in 1999, his efforts were instrumental in making INTERFET a success. He was also the first officer who had not served in Vietnam to command an Australian infantry battalion. After a career spent in an Army tasked with the territorial defence of Australia, Smith and his succeeding generation of officers were, once again, being asked to make an active contribution to regional security and stability.

The Tactical Consequences of the War in Vietnam

As in any combined operation, the key challenge encountered by Australian forces was the need to establish effective levels of interoperability with the American forces to which the Australian contingent was attached. This problem became particularly critical for the battalion sent to Vietnam in June 1965. This battalion was based with the US 173rd Airborne Brigade (Separate) in Bien Hoa and operated through the III Corps area. Not only was Australian equipment found to be of a poorer quality than that used by the US Army forces that they worked with, but there was ongoing disagreement over doctrine and tactics. As a result, the Australian Government dispatched a largely self-sufficient brigade-sized Task Force which conducted independent operations in its own area of operations in Phuoc Tuy Province from 1966 to 1971. The fact that the Task Force had its own logistics link through the coastal town of Vung Tau, enabled it to exercise a greater degree of self-reliance.

Although Australian forces came under the operational control of a US headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, the Australians were largely responsible for fighting the war in their own way.⁵⁴ Reflecting the different scale of the Australian forces involved, as well as the more limited resources available to them, Australian Army tactics for tropical counter-insurgency warfare remained quite distinct from those employed by the American forces. Building on their previous experience in Malaya and during Confrontation with Indonesia, the Army units employed patrolling and cordon and search operations to maintain constant pressure on the Viet Cong infrastructure. While a few major battles occurred, Australian operations, for the most part, were characterised by a 'softly-softly' approach. Small unit operations, rather than inflicting massive battlefield casualties, lay at the heart of Australian operational doctrine. One commentator has noted:

Australia's army was essentially a light infantry force and this was reflected in the troops' aptitude for patrolling, fieldcraft and night operations. America's big mechanised army was more able to devastate opposing forces. The small Australian force was more thoroughly trained and able to include a greater proportion of experienced soldiers and leaders than the US.⁵⁵

The tactical situation in the Australian area of operations assisted this approach, as the operations that the Australians conducted were relatively small-scale by comparison with some of the fighting experienced by the Americans.

Although over the period of the Australian involvement in Vietnam the Australian Army maintained its own 'national way of warfighting', the United States' influence did reshape the Australian Army. The Army acquired (or copied) many items of American equipment, including field radios, load-carrying gear and weapons. More significant was the exposure to the enormous resources of the United States' military, as the Australian Army had long experience of making do with limited support.

Operations in Vietnam did much to break down the tribal jealousies that had characterised an Army that, for over a decade, had focused almost exclusively on infantry operations in isolation. In Vietnam the Army learnt and practiced a combined arms approach that saved lives. The development of tactics that enabled commanders to orchestrate infantry, artillery and armour to attack strong-points and bunker systems—even in heavy jungle—was extremely innovative. Even in close country, infantry entering a bunker complex required—and welcomed—armour to deal with those bunkers.

The principal lesson of combined arms operations in Vietnam was that the armour deployed in jungle or urban terrain needs protection against shoulder launched weapons. Lightly protected armoured personnel carriers were not sufficient—tanks were required.⁵⁶ The Australian Army has not yet developed a capability that can replace the protection, firepower, accuracy and shock action provided by the tank. What is more, Robert Hall and Andrew Ross of the Australian Defence Force Academy have undertaken a recent comparative statistical analysis of attacks on prepared positions in Vietnam. Their study has demonstrated that the use of tanks in direct support of infantry assaults on bunker systems both radically reduced the casualty rate and increased the success rate of these attacks.⁵⁷ The study proves that, if they are not to suffer unnecessary casualties, attacking forces also require fire on call and may not be able to wait for air support to arrive. They need access to integrated and available artillery fire. Operating with both direct and indirect fire on call has the distinct advantage over aerial fire support that it will not go away. There is no guarantee that aircraft will be able to loiter over the battlefield forever. Moreover, as the results of this research demonstrate, most close air support—and particularly helicopter support—is extremely vulnerable to ground fire.

Having learnt these lessons at the cost of the lives of its soldiers, the Army needs to continue to propagate them. Too many unqualified armchair tacticians now argue that a medium to heavy armoured capability is irrelevant in Australia's likely operational circumstances. The Vietnam War demonstrated the strengths and the weaknesses of the Army and much of what was learned remains relevant. The likely range of operational environments that face the Army today has much in common with the Vietnam era. As in Vietnam, our troops will continue to serve in a mix of open, lightly wooded and complex terrain. They are likely to face asymmetric foes—either irregular 'warriors' like the Viet Cong, or conventional forces from less technologically advanced states such as the North Vietnamese Army. The availability of direct and indirect fire support gives the Australian Army the advantage in most of the combat scenarios that it will face. Until such time that new capabilities are found that can replace the weapon systems currently in service, the Army needs to maintain its combined arms systems and tactics. When soldiers' lives are at stake, bureaucrats without warfighting expertise cannot be allowed the final word when making decisions about core combat capabilities.

Michael Evans, of the Australian Army's Land Warfare Studies Centre, has concluded:

The most important doctrinal impact of Vietnam was the influence of combined arms warfare through the use of helicopters, close air support, artillery fire and armour. The Australian Army emerged from Vietnam in 1972 as a highly professional force. It was expert in Asian counter-revolutionary warfare and accustomed to fighting in tropical warfare conditions against a definite enemy and within the framework of an allied force. However, it was also a tactical-level Army, derivative of its allies in much of its operational thinking and with little experience of developing doctrine for independent operations.⁵⁸

With the realignment of defence policy to focus on the territorial defence of Australia, the Australian Defence Force had to prepare for conventional operations in continental Australia. For the Army, in particular, this change required a major adjustment—for twenty years, the Army had been training to conduct operations in close country within a tropical environment. Now the Army had to restructure itself for open-country warfare in the vast spaces of Australia's north. In 1975, the Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant General Francis Hassett, stated:

The starting point for the development of tactical doctrine is more likely to be that doctrine which existed at the conclusion of World War II, resulting from operations in the European and Middle East theatres, than the Australian experience in South-East Asia. We need to re-learn much which has been irrelevant in the Army's more recent operations. In the broader field of armoured warfare, armoured tactics as opposed to armoured-infantry tactics, is a field in which we must catch up with modern armoured warfare doctrine. I feel we are behind in this field.⁵⁹

While the Army made substantial progress in preparing for mobile open country warfare during the 1970s and 1980s, it received little practical guidance from the Whitlam and Fraser Governments. In particular, the Army required guidance as to the nature of the most likely operational scenarios, the expected structure of the Army in war and peace, or the operational relationship that it was expected to form with the other Services.⁶⁰ Accordingly, given limited resources, the Army spread itself thinly, maintaining a 'core' of skill sets and personnel to form an expansion base should it be required to meet a future threat. This approach was endorsed by a Senate Standing Committee inquiry into the Army in 1974.⁶¹ While this was happening, the Army's abilities to operate offshore, particularly in tropical and close country environments, deteriorated rapidly.⁶² The Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant General Donald Dunstan, concluded:

Expertise in specialised areas was being lost, or was at best static. We expected too many people to be jack-of-all-trades ... The worst part, however, was the level of operational readiness we could achieve. There was so much regrouping of men and equipment which had to be done. The result was that I could not guarantee to provide a task force of two battalions in less than about three months, or a battalion group in less than a month.⁶³

The lack of direction from Government was finally resolved with the issue of the 1987 Defence White Paper, *The Defence of Australia*.⁶⁴ The White Paper reiterated the theme of self-reliance in the territorial defence of Australia that had emerged in the wake of the Vietnam War. The restriction of the Army's role was complete—the reaction to the Vietnam commitment had seen the Army's mission shrink. From fighting the nation's wars and conducting a range of operations to further the national interest, the role of the Army was limited to homeland defence and providing a plausible deterrent to potential invaders.

Conclusion

In the years that followed the Vietnam War, the dominant thinking within governments from both sides of politics was that they had to administer a 'peace-time Army'.⁶⁵ This attitude flew in the face of the operational experience of the Regular Army since 1948. Although Australia had been at peace from the end of the Second World War, the Army had been required to maintain a high operational tempo, including the conduct of combat operations. As a result, Australia had played a major role in developing conditions of peace and security within the region. After Vietnam, the outgoing Liberal Government introduced the policy of defence self-reliance before leaving office and the successor Labor Government announced that Australian troops would never again serve on operations in Southeast Asia.⁶⁶ As we have since seen, 'never' is an awfully long time.

Within three years of the 1987 White Paper, the ADF was providing naval assets to the war for the liberation of Kuwait. Three years after that, an infantry battalion group was deployed on a complex peace enforcement operation in Somalia and saw combat. Australia played a

major part in peace operations in Cambodia and has sent its troops in harm's way in Rwanda, Bougainville and the Solomons. In 1999, the ADF mounted and commanded the international operation to restore peace and security in East Timor and has continued to provide the largest contingent in the multinational United Nations force that took over responsibility for that country. Australian ground troops were once again conducting operations in South East Asia. Peculiarly, no government had required the ADF to prepare for the command of a multinational military operation offshore, though once the contingency arose the military was expected to deal with the problem. The prevailing strategic orthodoxy was still dictated by the assumptions that had been derived from the political struggles over Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War. The actual employment of the ADF—and the Army in particular—had nothing in common with that guidance.

Vietnam did a great deal of harm to Australia's strategic vision and the capacity of its armed forces to do the national bidding. No threat-based strategic scenario ever eventuated—nor was it ever likely to—at least if Australia was expecting to be self-reliant in its own defence. No small or middle-level state has ever had the potential to launch more than nuisance conventional attacks against the Australian mainland. In the case of a significant deterioration in the international security environment, Australia would always have to provide for its security by taking collective action together with its friends and allies. As defence authority Dr Robert O'Neill wrote in 1976:

As far as major attacks are concerned, obviously we would need assistance if attacked by a super-power. There is no way that Australia can create a wholly self-reliant Defence force to fend off a super-power ... if a major attack is ever directed at Australia, it would probably come as a part of a great, global catastrophe ...⁶⁷

The most damaging long-term consequence of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War was not so much the failure of policy that saw an uncoordinated build-up of troops with an unclear operational objective, no exit strategy and no politico-strategic attempt to influence the conduct of the war. Rather, it was the isolationist policy that was adopted for ideological reasons that diminished Australia's ability to contribute to regional security. This retreat, combined with the slide from the laudable objective of greater self-sufficiency in military capability to self-reliant continental defence, left our forces ill-prepared for the military challenges of today's world.

Endnotes

This chapter is the product of wide-ranging discussions with a number of veterans of the Vietnam conflict as well as members who served in the Australian Army after the war concluded. It is impossible to acknowledge them all, but I would like to express my particular appreciation to General Sir Francis Hassett AC, KBE , CB, DSO, LVO (Retd); Lieutenant General John Coates, AC, MBE (Retd), Lieutenant Colonel Neil James and Warrant Officer Ian Kuring. My apologies to those many others unnamed who helped with advice in the preparation of this work—you know who you are. The views expressed in this chapter remain my own responsibility and are in no way the official position of the Australian Army or the Department of Defence

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