

# AUSTRALIA'S FIRST MILITARY COMMITMENT TO THE WAR IN VIETNAM

## Master class in jungle warfare

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The Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV) deployed to South Vietnam in 1962. It was Australia's first military contribution to the war in Vietnam. In particular, they provided jungle warfare advice. A little-known fact was their contribution to the U.S. and South Vietnam's approach to the cordon and searching of villages, which was a part of the broader counter-insurgency effort to defeat the Viet Cong (VC).

### Context

The Vietnam War, known today in Vietnam as the American War, was a prolonged conflict, from 1955 – 75.<sup>1</sup> The war saw the communist government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) and their insurgent allies the VC in the south; topple the government of South Vietnam to establish in 1976 the united Socialist Republic of Vietnam.<sup>2</sup>

South Vietnam's principal ally was the U.S., who wanted to stem the spread of communism in the region. The Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) from 1954 was responsible for the U.S. military's advice to the South's Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). The advice was aimed at transforming the ARVN into a self-sufficient force that could combat North Vietnam and defeat the VC insurgency.<sup>3</sup>

### Request for assistance from Australia

In 1962, the U.S. sought to have Australian military advisors join U.S. advisors in South Vietnam. The rationale was to bolster their regional political legitimacy.<sup>4</sup> The governments of South Vietnam and Australia discussed the concept. On 24 May, the Australian government announced the Army would deploy up to 30 officers and warrant officers to provide jungle warfare instruction as a part of the MAAG system. They became known as the AATTV or simply, the Team.

### Australian Army Training Team Vietnam

The Team arrived in Saigon on 3 August, where they established their Headquarters.<sup>5 6</sup> They then dispersed singly or as small groups to provide advice to military organisations mainly in the north of South Vietnam, which included the Vietnamese National Training Centre, the Civil Guard and Self Defence Corps Training Centre, and the Ranger Training Centre.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/event/Vietnam-War> [Accessed 14 July 2022]

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Ronald H. Spector. 1985. *Advice and Support. The Early Years: The US Army in Vietnam*. Washington D.C.: United States Army Center of Military History.

<sup>4</sup> Hartley, J. *The Australian Army Training Team Vietnam* in Grey, J. et. al. 2002. *The Australian Army and the Vietnam War, 1962-1972: The 2002 Chief of Army's Military History Conference*. Army History Unit, Department of Defence, PDF pp. 259 – 266.

<sup>5</sup> AATTV War Diary: AWM95 1/2/3 - 1 - 31 August 1962. <https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/awm-media/collection/RCDIG1028938/bundled/RCDIG1028938.pdf> (pdf. P.4). [Accessed 13 July 2022].

<sup>6</sup> Palazzo, A. 2011. *Australian military operations in Vietnam* (Australian Army Campaign Series 3. Second edition). Simon and Schuster, pp. 152 – 161.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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*The Australian Army Training Team Vietnam arriving in Saigon. From the front are LTCOL Mann, CAPT Tinkler, LT Gollings, and WO2 Quee, WO2 Perkins, CAPT George, and MAJ Fitzpatrick.*

It was not long before members of the Team first encountered the enemy. The Unit's war diary recounts, "First contact with the VC was made [on 17 August] by Capt J.B. Healy and Lt P.R. Young of the Danang [sic] Detachment".<sup>8</sup> The then Commanding Officer, Colonel F.P. (Ted) Serong, in a later amplification wrote, "...the two officers concerned were invited to accompany a small party of U.S. Army officers helicopter borne...Engine failure occurred...The speed of the re-action of the ARVN helicopter-borne relief party was a feature".<sup>9</sup>

At first, the Team's advisors were restricted to only providing training in jungle warfare methods, village defence, and communications. They were prohibited from accompanying their mentees on operations, which damaged the credibility of their efforts.<sup>10</sup>

From mid-1964, the Team's rules-of-engagement expanded to include advisory duties on operations. At the same time, the Unit expanded to 83 officers and warrant officers. This change meant advisors began accompanying ARVN units, Regional Force units, and Popular Force units on combat patrols.<sup>11</sup> In effect, this meant that the advisors led the patrols, and naturally, it meant a significant increase in risk.

"December [1967] was a black month for the Team...WO2 R. Seller and WO2 M.A. Henderson...were ambushed and killed...WO2 F. Hamersley...was wounded in action,

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<sup>8</sup> AATTV War Diary: AWM95 1/2/3 - 1 - 31 August 1962. (Pdf, p.6).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* (Pdf, p.12).

<sup>10</sup> Palazzo, A. 2011. *Australian military operations in Vietnam* (Australian Army Campaign Series 3. Second edition). Simon and Schuster, pp. 152 – 161.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

leading a patrol...WO2 R.D. Ford...was wounded in action by a...booby trap...WO2 J. Hayes...was wounded in action...WO2 J. Flannery...was wounded in action”.<sup>12</sup>

In all, four of the Team’s advisors received the Victoria Cross, two of them posthumously.<sup>13</sup> The team distinguished itself as the longest-serving and most highly decorated Australian unit of the War.

A contribution that the Team had in its time was the adaptation of Australian knowledge for the situation in Vietnam, the result of a concern for the inability of Regional Force and Popular Force units to conduct effective village search-operations.<sup>14</sup>

“...a paper produced by [the U.S.] ...has been issued to advisory teams and to ARVN units. It is based on the Australian Pamphlet 11 ‘Counter Revolutionary Warfare’ adapted for Vietnam conditions. The paper has aroused considerable interest among both American and Vietnamese...”<sup>15</sup>

The paper described the most effective way to conduct combined military and police village cordon and search operations, a key aspect of the counter-insurgency effort.

### **Achievements**

For around eight years, the AATTV successfully accompanied their mentees on combat patrols. The Team eventually reached a size of 227, which by then included corporals.<sup>16</sup>



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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*Quang Ngai Province, South Vietnam. 1968. Australian Army Adviser, WO2 Chris McEvoy (right), prepares to move his platoon out on patrol near Sa Huynh in Quang Ngai Province. WO2 McEvoy, a member of the AATTV, was working with the Mobile Strike Force, a reactionary unit that was a part of the US Special Forces.*

<sup>12</sup> AATTV War Diary: AWM98 R723135 PART 1...July 1965 - December 1967. <https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/awm-media/collection/RCDIG1030317/bundled/RCDIG1030317.pdf> (pdf, pp.19- 20).

<sup>13</sup> Palazzo, A. 2011. *Australian military operations in Vietnam* (Australian Army Campaign Series 3. Second edition). Simon and Schuster, pp. 152 – 161.

<sup>14</sup> AATTV War Diary: AWM95 1259 - 1 - 30 November 1968. <https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/awm-media/collection/RCDIG1029109/bundled/RCDIG1029109.pdf> (pdf p. 34).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. (pdf p. 3).

<sup>16</sup> Hartley, J. *The Australian Army Training Team Vietnam* in Grey, J. et. al. 2002. *The Australian Army and the Vietnam War, 1962-1972: The 2002 Chief of Army's Military History Conference*. Army History Unit, Department of Defence, PDF pp. 259 – 266.

The Team achieved much, especially their positive influence on South Vietnamese commanders' ability to conduct effective tactical patrols. The warrant officers were particularly successful with their advising of their assigned forces.<sup>17</sup>

However, the Team's veterans highlight two regrets. First, their inability to address the variable commitment and performance of the units that they advised, likely the result of their lack of local faith in the government of South Vietnam. Secondly, what they saw as the seeming abandonment of the South Vietnamese by the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam.<sup>18</sup>

990 personnel served with the Team from 1962 – 73. Thirty-three were killed and 122 wounded. The Unit received 113 Imperial honours, 245 American awards, and 369 Republic of Vietnam awards. It also received the U.S. Army's Meritorious Unit Commendation and the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Palm Unit Citation.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Palazzo, A. 2011. *Australian military operations in Vietnam* (Australian Army Campaign Series 3. Second edition). Simon and Schuster, pp. 152 – 161.