

Vietnam

The soldier's experience



What do you know about the Australian experience of the Vietnam War?

Before going on to the next page, brainstorm in class and record the main ideas you have here.

The Australian experience of the Vietnam War was:

When complete, go to the next page.



Australian military involvement in the Vietnam War began in August 1962 when 30 members of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV) arrived in Vietnam to assist in training the Army of the Republic of Vietnam.

In 1965 the Australian Government sent an infantry battalion (1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment) and support forces totalling about 1100 men to Bien Hoa base, under United States control.

In April 1966 the Australian forces were moved to their own area at Nui Dat and Vung Tau in Phuoc Tuy Province, with support troops and services as part of the commitment.

At its peak, in January 1969, there were more than 7,000 Australian troops in Vietnam at the one time.

By 1970, the Australian commitment was being reduced, and most had been withdrawn by December 1971. The last troops, an Embassy Guard, left in June 1973.

South Vietnam fell to the North Vietnamese forces in April 1975.

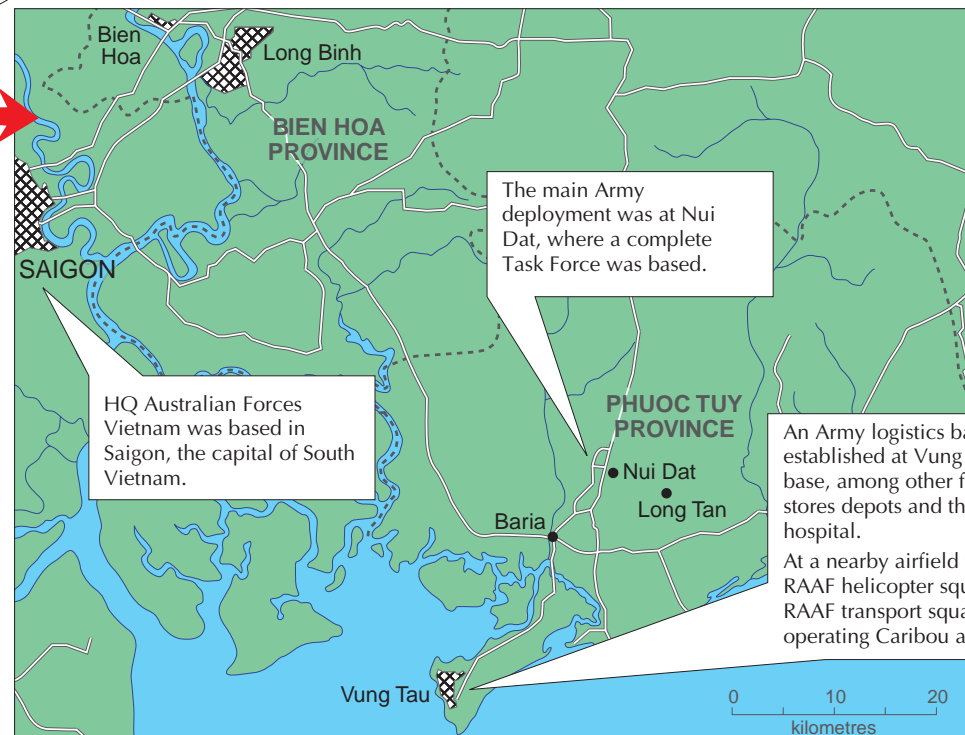
RAN destroyers operated with US Forces in the coastal waters of both North and South Vietnam.

The Australian Army Training Team Vietnam operated throughout South Vietnam with the South Vietnamese Army.

A RAAF bomber Squadron was based at Phan Rang

Army vessels transported materiel along the coast of South Vietnam.

RAN ships transported men and materials to and from Australia.



A total of about 50,000 men and women served, approximately half of these being conscripts. Five hundred and twenty men are recorded as being killed or dying during their service, and these are commemorated on local memorials, on the Roll of Honour at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, and in that city's official Vietnam Memorial on ANZAC Parade.

On to next page

But this information on the previous page, important though it is, does not tell us much about the experience of war.

Look at the following excerpts and photographs, and for each try to find a short phrase that represents the main war experience it reflects. For example, you might decide that one source tells you about the bravery of men in Vietnam; another tells you about the shock of losing a mate to 'friendly fire'; another might tell you about the boredom suffered much of the time; and so on. These short summaries will help you to realise the variety of elements that make up the individuals' experiences of their war.

After you examine each source and think about and discuss it, write your summary response in the space provided.

At the end, prepare a revised version of your ideas in the space provided and compare them with the initial ideas which you wrote on page 2.

source 1

Midway through our tour Private John McQuat was killed in action. The morale of the soldiers was greatly affected. John was a quiet, popular member of the platoon. He was killed during a contact in the middle of the night. He was shot five times through the lower stomach. The contact was initiated with rifle fire by a recent reinforcement to the platoon ... It was very dark, raining and storming. We lost John because another soldier fired at night-time from one pit to another and broke all the rules.

(Peter Lauder in Gary McKay, *Vietnam Fragments*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1992 page 196)

This was reported in the newspapers as:

The other Australian killed, in a separate incident was Private J. L. McQuat, of Rocky Gully, Western Australia. Private McQuat, of the 8th Battalion, was killed during operations against the Viet Cong in Phuoc Tuy Province on Thursday.

(The Age, 2 April 1970)

This source tells me that:

Note: More detail on this incident is available online at: <http://www.anzacday.org.au/education/activities/mcquat/mcquat01.html>

source 2

The person I replaced in 8 RAR had been bitten by a snake as he placed his foot in his boot. I arrived as a reinforcement and was treated with indifference for the next six months ... I hadn't been through the bonding which goes with arriving as a Battalion and I didn't suffer fools gladly. Those that I became close to were other reinforcements who felt there was a common bond between us. That did little to lessen the anger and neglect I felt at the hands of our so-called 'fellow soldiers in arms'.

During the time I spent in Vietnam, my fondest memories were the sunsets and sunrises, which were really beautiful and a calming release from all the activity which involved an infantry battalion. The times on gun picquet [guard], high up in the towers at Nui Dat were reflective and an occasional game of footy or volley ball helped me to forget momentarily those I left at home.

(Leon Babako in Maree Rowe (compiler), *Vietnam Veterans. Sons of the Hunter*, Australian Military History Publications, Loftus NSW, 2002 page 11)

This source tells me that:

source 3

On patrol

This source tells me that:

source 4

At rest in camp at Nui Dat

This source tells me that:

source 5

The most difficult incident I had was when we had been ambushing the movement of the enemy from towns to their sanctuaries in the mountains ... One night, just after three in the morning, the enemy came through one pit, which wasn't alert, walked through the middle of the position and tripped over our ... radio aerial. We were in shell scrapes and the enemy fell between me and my radio operator. We were both immediately bolt upright and although I tried to tackle this cove and grabbed him around an ankle, he got away and took off. We shot him but the next morning when we followed up the blood trail one of the Diggers tripped an M16 mine. It jumped out of the ground and killed three soldiers and wounded another two. That was the start of a real test of leadership because ... to get back to base we had to pass through the village of Lang Phuoc Hai and the soldiers were weary and very much disturbed, and of course so was I.

But we had lost three killed, had a couple more wounded, and I sensed some soldiers were quite prepared to take revenge on this bloody town ... I ... read the riot act, told them that it was absolute horseshit to contemplate seeking revenge on seemingly innocent people even though we knew that the Viet Cong were being supported by some of the people in this particular village ... [W]e got through and out the other side and the discipline of the Australian soldiers came to the fore. That was good.

It was a testing day.

(David Kibbey in Gary McKay, *Vietnam Fragments*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1992 pages 96-97)

This source tells me that:

source 6

My duties at the Dat were to receive and issue stores, get the dirty washing, bag it and take it to the laundry in Baria and shop for those who couldn't get to town. The people who owned the laundry were my first real contacts with the local Vietnamese and it was a real education for me, as I was able to experience at first-hand the habits and traditions of the local population.

(Kevin Geoghegan in Maree Rowe (compiler), *Vietnam Veterans. Sons of the Hunter*, Australian Military History Publications, Loftus NSW, 2002 page 111)

This source tells me that:

source 7

Our time [at Vung Tau] was spent doing a 24-hour duty on the front gate, followed by two days of other duties, before another 24-hours on the gate. The other duties consisted of repairing the perimeter wire, general repairs and a fair amount of time doing nothing. On our nights off we mostly spent in the bar area of Vungers [Vung Tau] having a good time.

(John McIntosh in Maree Rowe (compiler), *Vietnam Veterans. Sons of the Hunter*, Australian Military History Publications, Loftus NSW, 2002 page 177)

This source tells me that:

source 8

Then we went down there on another operation and one of my fellows tripped a mine ... The immediate impact of that mine on the platoon was what is going on? Our fellows were being hurt and there was no one to take it out on. It's not a fair fight ... From there it just got worse. The M16 mines then started to appear, and they were cutting a swathe through the company

... It got to the stage where it was a real effort to get the guys psyched up ready to move ... I mean, guys would suddenly develop malaria and broken legs and all sorts of things. It had an enormous psychological impact on the men ... It's all very well to say we'll take casualties in a minefield, but that is easy when it's not happening to you. You only need to have one guy wounded, slightly wounded, and it has an impact on everybody.

(Gordon Hurford in Gary McKay, *Vietnam Fragments*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1992 pages 152)

This source tells me that:

source 9

A wounded man on a patrol

This source tells me that:

source 10

It was a funny fear, the first night on picquet. Everything is new to you ... They had these fireflies in Vietnam and they looked like torches and we're staring into the dark, looking at these lights down on the wire. Our eyes were like saucers.

'Is that a torch?'

'I don't know.'

Next minute we hear a noise out to the left, a rustle. We were underneath rubber trees and there were all these dead leaves on the ground. We hear this rustle through them, and Herb says 'What's that?'

'I don't know.'

'It's out there, go and have a look.' 'You go and have a look.'

'You go out.' 'I'm not going out.'

I end up going out ... and as soon as I step out this mongoose cuts away through the leaves. I've gone cold, I'm sweating and I'm cold. God Jesus, you've got no idea of the fear.

Jeff Sculley in Stuart Rintoul, *Ashes of Vietnam*, William Heinemann/ABC, Melbourne, 1987 page 41)

This source tells me that:

source 11



Daily Mirror 19 May 1966

This source tells me that:

source 12

I remember the first night we spent outside the camp. I think it was in a rubber plantation and there was a full moon, everything was totally lit up and I think the rubber trees had lost their leaves or something ... you could see every guy on the ground, a whole platoon, and I was really scared then. A leaf would rustle, someone would cough and I was ready to shit.

After a while you became accustomed to it. No one attacked you, you never shot anyone, you didn't hear any gunfire. It was sort of boring, hot, humid. You got wet, you got eaten by the mosquitoes, the leeches. You were tramping around in water, fighting your way through bamboo and you became very, very blasé. I think for the first two months that I was out with the battalion we had not one single contact.

(Bernard Szapiel in Stuart Rintoul, *Ashes of Vietnam*, William Heinemann/ABC, Melbourne, 1987 page 147)

This source tells me that:

source 13



Searching an ox cart

This source tells me that:

source 14



Gary McKay and Elizabeth Stewart, *Viet Nam Shots*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2002 page 143

Bars in Vung Tau

This source tells me that:

source 15

The forward scout got about half way along [a creek bed] and he just died on the spot, he just crumpled and that was it. We didn't see anything, we didn't hear anything, he just crumpled. A very good friend of mine, he went out to try to fix him up and he only got to the stage where he was bending over him, he didn't even get a chance to undo his medical bag, he just got shot straight through the heart, from one side to the other. Another one of our medics got there and he got shot just straight through the head ... They made me bag them up in the green bags and I can still remember my friend's face. He was smiling. I'd known him since 1961, so I guess by the time of his death that would have been five years, and we often used to sit at night after operations were finished and talk about what we would do once we got back home. He was a married chap with four kids I think. At that time, to me it seemed so unfair because, sure, I was married, but I had no kids, and maybe it should have been me that had gone out there.

(Peter Vandenberg in Stuart Rintoul, *Ashes of Vietnam*, William Heinemann/ABC, Melbourne, 1987 pages 169-170)

This source tells me that:

source 16

The worst memories came from our experiences with the wounded and dead. As part of a hospital unit, the arrival of dust off choppers snapped everyone into action, moving wounded from the pad into triage and helping prep them for medical attention Helping prepare bodies for return to Australia and conveying them to the airport was never very pleasant. Our experiences were all the more telling when mates were involved.

(David Robinson in Maree Rowe (compiler), *Vietnam Veterans. Sons of the Hunter*, Australian Military History Publications, Loftus NSW, 2002 page 239)

This source tells me that:

source 17

I was posted to the jungle camp in Nui Dat with 17 Construction Squadron, RAE. Because I had done a drivers' course before leaving Australia, my time in Nui Dat was mainly spent building roads across rice paddies and transporting supplies and building materials to shot-up villages as the Army had decided to patch them up as a 'good will' gesture.

(Douglas Jordan in Maree Rowe (compiler), *Vietnam Veterans. Sons of the Hunter*, Australian Military History Publications, Loftus NSW, 2002 page 151)

This source tells me that:

source 18



Stuart Rintoul, *Ashes of Vietnam*, William Heinemann/ABC, Melbourne, 1987

Mine wounds

This source tells me that:

source 19



Conditions at Nui Dat (Terry Burstall, *The Soldier's Story*, UQP, St Lucia, 1986)

Tents at Nui Dat

This source tells me that:

source 20

'Kevin Wheatley knew he was going to die when he made the decision to stay with his [wounded] friend in the face of the enemy ...'

Kevin Wheatley was killed leading Vietnamese [troops] ... When the group was attacked by a company of Vietcong, Warrant Officer Wheatley's fellow Australian officer, Warrant Officer Swanton, was shot in the chest. Under heavy machine gun and automatic rifle fire, Warrant Officer Wheatley managed to half-drag, half-carry Swanton from open rice paddies to woodland about 200 metres away.

With the Vietcong only 10 metres away, he was urged to leave his dying comrade and flee. He refused and was last seen pulling the pins from two grenades and calmly awaiting the enemy. Two grenade explosions were heard, followed by several bursts of fire. The two bodies were found at first light next morning lying together. Both men had died of gunshot wounds.

(Based on an article in *The Sunday Age* 15 August 1993 by Gary Tippet and *The Age* 13 July 1993 by John Lahey)

This source tells me that:

source 21

Each company [at Nui Dat] had its own 'boozier' and in true Aussie Digger-style we always made sure we had enough time for a few beers ... There was an outdoor movie theatre set up ... Personalities like Lorrae Desmond, Patti McGrath, Col Joye and many others visited Nui Dat to entertain the troops.

(Arthur Francis in Maree Rowe (compiler), *Vietnam Veterans. Sons of the Hunter*, Australian Military History Publications, Loftus NSW, 2002 page 11)

This source tells me that:

source 22

[In the Civil Affairs Unit] I ... travelled the entire Province on a weekly basis, treating hundreds of civilians suffering with diseases and illnesses not normally seen in Australia. I am convinced that our secondary role was that of providing mobile target range for 'Charlie' [Viet Cong], who never failed to take notice of us by making us a constant rifle and mortar target whenever we were on the roads or set up in a market place.

(Peter Hulsing in Maree Rowe (compiler), *Vietnam Veterans. Sons of the Hunter*, Australian Military History Publications, Loftus NSW, 2002 page 140)

This source tells me that:

source 23



Carrying a wounded man to an evacuation helicopter

This source tells me that:

source 24



Maree Rowe (compiler), *Vietnam Veterans. Sons of the Hunter*, Australian Military History Publications, Loftus NSW, 2002 page 44)

Loading bombs

This source tells me that:

source 25

To me, Vietnam is remembered as the sand of Vung Tau that got into clothing, food, hair, skin and just about everything. Nui Dat was red mud and more red mud! The memory that comes up is the great futility and helplessness of sitting in a muddy trench in the middle of a rubber plantation, hearing the [enemy] mortars being fired from about three thousand metres away. Then we counted the shells in the air, waiting for them to arrive and go off, knowing that there was nothing we could do about it. Such is war!

(Maree Rowe (compiler), *Vietnam Veterans. Sons of the Hunter*, Australian Military History Publications, Loftus NSW, 2002 page 44)

This source tells me that:

source 26

On patrol through a village

This source tells me that:

source 27

On the HMAS *Perth* there was the shock and horror of being straddled by artillery shells on quite a few occasions and being 'looked on' by radar-controlled, land to sea 'stick' missiles used by the North Vietnamese and supplied by China. There was the awe of operating with the American battleship USS *New Jersey*, firing shells nearly as big as a small car and from over the horizon. These shells could be seen with the naked eye as they passed overhead.

(Geoffrey Daniels in Maree Rowe (compiler), *Vietnam Veterans. Sons of the Hunter*, Australian Military History Publications, Loftus NSW, 2002 page 73)

This source tells me that:

source 28



Maree Rowe (compiler), *Vietnam Veterans. Sons of the Hunter*, Australian Military History Publications, Loftus NSW, 2002 page 17)

On recreation leave at Vung Tau

This source tells me that:

source 29



Infantry with tanks in support

This source tells me that:

Now, having read the excerpts and viewed the images, record below your revised ideas, then compare them with the initial ideas recorded on page 2.