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Vietnam as History: the Australian Case

Jeffrey Grey

War has played a large part in the shaping of Australian society and national identity, but occupies a much less prominent part in the writing of the nation's history. And in contrast to the situation in the United States, where the flood of published material of all types threatens to overwhelm the student of the subject, Australian historical writing on the Vietnam War is still in the early and tentative stages of development.¹ Equally, because Australia's involvement was smaller in relative terms than America's, and because that involvement did not pose such fundamental questions for Australians, there is less to be said about it.

Participation in the two world wars was followed by the commissioning of large, multi-authored official histories which, for their time, were remarkably sophisticated and thorough. Indeed the history of Australian efforts in the First World War, and more especially its editor and principal author C.E.W. Bean, has had a long-lasting influence upon the shape of historical writing on war in this country.² In contrast to the official histories elsewhere, written often to defend as well as explain the conduct of the war, Bean's history concerned itself with the extraordinary deeds of ordinary men, the soldiers themselves, and had less to say about strategy and virtually nothing on generalship, logistics or administration. The history written after the Second World War, edited by Gavin Long, took its cue from Bean and again concentrated on a trench level view of the fighting, although because of the vastly greater mobilisation of national resources involved between 1939-45 this series devoted much more attention to activities in the domestic economy and society.

In both world wars Australian correspondents were attached to the forces to report on their activities, and in both cases a decision was made to commission an official history before the conflict had ended. In the numerous smaller wars and warlike actions in which Australia found itself engaged after 1945—in Japan on occupation duty and in the Korean War, Malayan Emergency, Indonesian Confrontation and Vietnam—histories were commissioned long after the events they were to analyse, and the authors appointed had no first hand experience of these conflicts. The history of the Korean War was completed only in 1985,³ and an official historian for the postwar southeast Asian conflicts, of which Vietnam is the centrepiece so to speak, was appointed only in 1983. The restrictions of the relevant archival legislation which, as in

Britain, precludes public access to government records until they are thirty years old, together with the absence, as yet, of any official history as was published for earlier conflicts, means that Australian writing on the Vietnam War lacks an authoritative official work which establishes the record and against which others may react or from which they may take a lead.

A number of journalists in Australia wrote about Australian involvement during the Vietnam War, and of course there was a large and active anti-war publishing effort. By its nature little of the latter has survived, while the former often belonged to a tradition of Australian war writing which went back to Chester Wilmot and Kenneth Slessor in the Second World War, if not indeed to Bean himself—factual writing about the experiences and conditions of the troops in the field of a kind common to war correspondents everywhere.⁴ After a new Australian government withdrew the last of its forces in 1972, Vietnam disappeared quickly from the national agenda. With one or two exceptions it was not to receive serious attention again as a subject for nearly a decade.

The contemporary debate over Australian participation in the war continues to be reflected in most of the history written in the last decade. The universities were a focal point for anti-war activism at the height of the war, and some academics took a leading role in opposition “teach-ins” and street protests. Others, of course, supported government policy, but they have been much more reticent subsequently. Indeed, it is almost impossible now to find anyone who defends seriously the stated aims for which Australia went to war in Vietnam.

In response to the fall of Saigon in 1975, the Labor Prime Minister, E.G. (Gough) Whitlam, directed the Department of Foreign Affairs to prepare a paper on the Australian commitment, and this was tabled in the Parliament on 13 May.⁵ Much of the paper was taken up with an examination of the process by which Australian forces had been committed, with further attention given to the several increases in Australian troop strength undertaken between 1966-67. Arguing that “the decision in April 1965 to send a battalion for active service in South Vietnam was the crucial issue in Australia’s commitment”, the paper devoted most space to the events surrounding the “request” for direct military support from the South Vietnamese Government. In announcing the decision to send troops the then Prime Minister of the Liberal Government, Sir Robert Menzies, had stated that his Government acted upon such a request, although it was never in fact produced. As it transpired, there had been no such request. Rather, the Government of Dr Phan Huy Quat had agreed to the despatch of Australian troops after this had been arranged between the Australian and American Governments and he himself had been pressured into acceptance. The Menzies Government saw a request as necessary in order that Australian action could be explained under the terms of the SEATO Treaty—which precluded action by member countries like Australia on the territory of

protocol states such as South Vietnam except at the specific request of their governments—although in this instance SEATO was never actually invoked.

Critics then and subsequently were quick to seize on the issue of the “request”, and to use the circumstances under which it was produced as proof that the Australian Government acted contrary to the wishes of the South Vietnamese and at the behest of the United States.⁶ While there can be little doubt about the contrived nature of the request in 1965, this attitude ignored the fact that a succession of South Vietnamese Government officials had called upon Australia for various forms of non-specific military assistance in the years since 1961. A more complex interpretation of the steps leading to Australian involvement has gradually appeared, and this emphasises both that Vietnam was not the central issue in Australian thinking at this time, and that the Australian Government acted with greater concern for Australian interests than earlier critics had allowed.

Australian defence and foreign policy has been characterised by a search for security tied to the guarantees of a great and powerful friend. Until the fall of Singapore this was provided by Britain, but the aftermath of the Second World War served to emphasise Britain’s falling imperial might, and while Australia never switched allegiance to the United States in the unthinking manner sometimes portrayed, increasingly in the 1950s and early 1960s the Australian Government saw the preponderant Western role in southeast Asia as an American one. The ANZUS Treaty, signed in 1951, had provided non-specific assurances but in the changing strategic environment of the early 1960s this was felt to be insufficient should Australian interests be threatened directly. This threat was perceived as coming not from China, despite Menzies’ public statements about “the downward thrust of Asian communism”, but from Indonesia.

Australia had viewed with concern the Indonesian incorporation of the former Dutch possession of West New Guinea in 1961, and Sukarno’s policy of “confrontation” with Malaysia, in which Australian troops were involved from 1964 by virtue of existing defence ties with the British and Malaysian Governments, heightened alarm in Canberra. In a major study of Australian foreign policy at this time, historian Gregory Pemberton has shown the paramount importance of the relationship with Indonesia for any understanding of Australian Vietnam policy:⁷ Australian efforts to ensure that the United States increased and maintained its commitment in southeast Asia were directed to containing Sukarno as much as they were to preventing the further expansion of communist power in Indochina. Other writers have taken the interpretation of this activist policy stance further, however, in arguing that the American Government would not have expanded its own involvement in Vietnam in 1965 but for the persistent and continuous badgering of the Australian Government, which sought to provide the

diplomatic preconditions which would make an American combat commitment possible.⁸ Of course, it may be objected at once that this explanatory tail wags the historical dog, and that such a view ignores entirely the numerous domestic pressures within the United States itself which led President Johnson to increase substantially the American combat presence. Perhaps the most interesting thing about this argument is that it flies in the face of a tradition of Australian historical writing, especially on the left, which sees Australian foreign policy as reactive and entirely at the disposal of one or other great power.

In the context of the war as a whole, the actual Australian commitment was of marginal significance. At its height, the Australian Task Force in Phuoc Tuy province numbered 8300 men. Approximately 50,000 served in total, of whom 500 were killed and over 2000 wounded.⁹ Against the peak troop presence of the Koreans (50,000) or Thais (11,500), much less the ARVN or the US, it was a tiny effort. But there are other ways of assessing the Australian military contribution. Not only were Australians the first of the Free World Military Assistance Forces to join the US in the field, but unlike the Koreans and Thais, they and the New Zealanders bore the costs of the deployment themselves. As a force from a stable western liberal democracy in Asia their presence lent credibility to Johnson's call for "more flags" in Vietnam, while their undoubted military effectiveness reinforced further the value of the contribution.¹⁰

Australia's military effort has been looked at from two perspectives: in terms of the combat experience and, less frequently, from a strategic and institutional viewpoint. Personal experience is a strong suit in Australian military writing, the tradition descending in an unbroken line from Dr Bean and the First World War, and the bulk of the work in this category has recounted the war from a unit or individual perspective. A number of army units produced illustrated accounts of their tours of duty, but only one was published commercially.¹¹ The passage of time has neutralised most of the controversy generated by an unpopular war, and Vietnam is now being incorporated into the mainstream of the Australian military tradition in a number of accounts.¹² This attitude is reflected in some, although by no means all, of the memoirs and personal recollections. Those written by regulars have tended to dwell on the positive features of military service and have reserved criticism for the perceived lack of support for their efforts in Australia.¹³ Other accounts are much more critical of the army itself, or are bitter at the ingratitude of the civilian population back home, an attitude which many national servicemen [conscripts] first encountered only after their return from active service.¹⁴ The sense of hostility and even despair which these accounts portray is much more resonant within the small number of combat novels written by Australian authors, although most of the latter were not written by combat veterans.¹⁵

There are a number of more sophisticated treatments of Australia's operational involvement, at both the unit and higher levels. The first Australian combat troops were committed in 1962 as part of a training and advisory mission which later worked through the US Special Forces network and, later still, had some part in the Phoenix programme. This unit's diverse and difficult tasks have been treated at great length,¹⁶ in a manner which combines successfully the emphasis on individual experience which is so important in the Australian military tradition with some pertinent analysis of the policy which governed the Training Team's deployment. The first Australian battalion to see action in 1965–1966, as part of the US 173rd Airborne Brigade in Bien Hoa province, has also been treated at length.¹⁷ The circumstances of this unit's deployment, and the undoubted difficulties which ensued from attaching the battalion to a larger force which operated on different doctrinal and administrative assumptions, allows the author to contrast unfavourably American tactical shortcomings with Australian professionalism, thus reinforcing one of the central tenets of the Australian military myth. The same process is at work in the official account of the Special Air Service Regiment, a book which fulfills the additional function of demonstrating, at least to the author's satisfaction, the continuing utility of special forces in the Australian army.¹⁸

A wider perspective is rare, and there has been almost no institutional or systemic analysis of the army in this period. The army went to Vietnam immediately following a period of considerable organisational upheaval resulting from the adoption and then abandonment of the Pentropic division,¹⁹ and with a command and control system which, at least initially, was not as well suited to the political-military demands placed upon it as arguably it needed to be.²⁰ There is only one analysis of the Australian Task Force's operations overall in Vietnam between 1966–72, and this is at times highly critical of the perceived absence of "a coherent and effective military role on the ground".²¹ The author's overall contention that because the war in Vietnam was lost Australia's role in Phuoc Tuy province was a failure implies a misunderstanding of the relationship between the operational and strategic levels of war, but other criticisms concerning, for example, the construction of the Dat Do-Phuoc Hai minefield or the failure of the Australians to take over the province advisory role from the Americans are well sustained. The tone overall is too critical, but the absence to date of a countervailing view is striking.²²

The sociology of the forces at this time is likewise a neglected field, although it should be added that this is true for all of Australia's wars. The difference, however, is that only in this war were conscripts sent on active service outside Australian territory,²³ and it is the conscript element of the army, about one-third only of those who served in Vietnam, which has attracted scholarly attention, most notably in the work of Jane Ross.²⁴ The specific weakness of this work is that it

relegates the regular army majority to the peripheries, while the absence of any wider study of the national service scheme as a whole robs it of necessary context and comparison.

Conscription itself was reintroduced in April 1964, before any decision had been made about deploying combat units to Vietnam and in the context again of fears about an intensified Indonesian insurgency in Borneo. Indeed, it is not widely known that both the army and the Department of Labour and National Service opposed the reintroduction of the scheme, citing the experience in the 1950s when national servicemen had been required to perform only six months compulsory training and had had no overseas service obligation. The deployment of conscripts on active service in Vietnam, beginning in mid-1966, sparked growing opposition within Australia at a level not seen since the bitterly fought conscription referenda during the First World War. Curiously, this aspect of Australia's Vietnam War has been least frequently and least satisfactorily dealt with in the historical literature.²⁵ The Moratorium movement, as anti-conscription, anti-war activism came to be called, still awaits its historian, although the documentary legacy of the various oppositional groupings is rich and varied and a number of postgraduate theses have been written on aspects of the subject. Published work remains thin. Much of it is written by former activists and has a defensive tone, while other authors are at pains to demonstrate a tradition of anti-war dissent and the existence of a peace movement throughout our history, as if this somehow validates the movement in the 1960s.²⁶ There are important legal, constitutional, political and moral issues involved in the imposition of national service for Vietnam, but only a handful of writers seem concerned to follow them through.²⁷

Overviews of the Australian war have been few, and generally mixed in quality. The earliest contribution in this area, a series of essays published in the early 1980s,²⁸ suffered from the usual problems of edited works and provided an uneasy mix of academic work with personal recollection. A similar effort produced at the end of the decade suffered from many of the same faults.²⁹ Both books bring together a variety of perspectives critical of Australian involvement, but the quality of the scholarship is uneven and the strident authorial voice employed sits ill with attempts to provide a detached—which is not to say disengaged—perspective on events which occurred before a sizeable section of the Australian population was born.

The legacy of the Vietnam War, in Australia as in the United States, is demonstrated most clearly by the large influx of Indochinese migrants and refugees since 1975, and by the continuing fight for recognition by Vietnam veterans. Asian immigration has long been a political issue in Australia, a nation which until the 1960s excluded non-white migrants through the provisions of the Immigration Act in the interests of a white Australia policy. Despite the best attempts of the racist fringe, and the occasional unwise sally by more establishment

figures, Australian society has absorbed Indochinese migrants, as it has the earlier waves of European and Middle Eastern migrants who have arrived since the Second World War, without significant social upheaval.³⁰ The problems of Vietnam veterans are both more public and more vexed. The Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia was formed in 1980 as a result of dissatisfaction with existing veterans' groups, principally the Returned Services League, and with the bureaucracy of the Department of Veterans' Affairs. It represents no more than 5,000 members, about one-tenth of those eligible, but has played a prominent role as a ginger group in veterans' politics, especially over the cluster of issues surrounding Agent Orange and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, which is claimed by some to be more prevalent in this group of veterans than in any other.³¹ As in the United States, there is a clear perception that this generation has not been accorded the recognition and level of public esteem enjoyed, in particular, by soldiers of the Second World War. In the Australian case at least this is to assume that the latter was typical of the public response to returning service personnel throughout the twentieth century, a proposition which must be qualified fairly heavily. In the United States, the historiographical battle lines in most cases match those drawn politically during the war; the arguments of the 1980s in many cases have not advanced much beyond those of the 1960s. In Australia, on the other hand, the moral argument to some extent has shifted from the political arena of the 1960s and 1970s to the field of veterans' entitlements in the 1980s and 1990s. Whatever advance it may represent otherwise, it has not helped in the clear analysis of veterans' issues.

As the archives begin to open in the next decade we can expect an increase in the number of works dealing with Australian participation in the war, and can hope for an improvement in the scholarly and evidential base of research in some of the areas noted above. Given the lines along which the writing of Australian military history has developed in the 75 years since the First World War, it is by no means obvious that this will result in a broadening of the focus of the work which results.

1 This article will concern itself with writing on Australian involvement in Vietnam, and will not deal with the important work on the wider war by scholars such as David G. Marr and Carlyle Thayer, both Americans long resident in Australia, or of Australians such as David Chandler and Ben Kiernan.

² See Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey. "Australian and New Zealand Writing on the First World War", in Jürgen Rohwer (ed). *Neue Forschungen zum Ersten Weltkrieg*, Koblenz, 1985.

³ Robert O'Neill. *Australia in the Korean War 1950-53*. Volume I *Strategy and Diplomacy*, Canberra, 1983; Volume II *Combat Operations*, Canberra, 1985.

⁴ Vietnam examples are Gerald L. Stone. *War without Honour*, Jacaranda Press, Melbourne, 1966 and Ian Mackay. *Australians in Vietnam*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1968.

⁵ [R.G. Neale]. "Australia's Military Commitment to Vietnam", Commonwealth Parliamentary Paper, 13 May 1975.

⁶ For a good example see Greg Lockhart. "Fear and Dependence: Australia's Vietnam Policy, 1965-1985", in Kenneth Maddock & Barry Wright (eds). *War: Australia and Vietnam*, Harper & Row, Sydney, 1987, pp. 11-36.

⁷ Gregory Pemberton. *All the Way. Australia's Road to Vietnam*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1987.

⁸ Glen St.J. Barclay. *A Very Small Insurance Policy. The Politics of Australian Involvement in Vietnam, 1954-1967*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1988. A milder statement of the thesis is contained in Michael Sexton. *War for the Asking. Australia's Vietnam Secrets*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1981.

⁹ See the table given in footnote 5 of Jane Ross. "Veterans in Australia: the Search for Integration", in this volume, pp. 50-73.

¹⁰ Small air and naval units were attached to US forces also. See Denis Fairfax. *Royal Australian Navy in Vietnam*, Australian Government Publishing Services, Canberra, 1980, and George Odgers. *Mission Vietnam. Royal Australian Air Force Operations, 1964-1972*, Australian Government Publishing Services, Canberra, 1974.

¹¹ Robert O'Neill. *Vietnam Task. The 5th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, 1966-67*, Cassell, Australia Ltd., Melbourne, 1968. The author was later official historian for the Korean War, Director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, and is now Chichele Professor of the History of War at Oxford University.

¹² Especially in the work of Lex McAulay. See *The Battle of Long Tan. The Legend of Anzac Upheld*, Hutchinson, Melbourne, 1986; *The Battle of Coral. Fire Support Bases Coral and Balmoral May 1968*, Hutchinson, Melbourne, 1988; and his heavily illustrated *Contact. Australians in Vietnam*, Hutchinson Melbourne, 1989.

¹³ Gary McKay. *In Good Company. One Man's War in Vietnam*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1986; Barry Petersen, *Tiger Men. An Australian Soldier's Secret War in Vietnam*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1988.

¹⁴ Terry Burstall. *The Soldier's Story. The Battle of Xa Long Tan*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1986; Martin Cameron. *Australia's Longest War*, author, 1987.

¹⁵ An exception is a collection of short stories, poems and recollections, John J. Coe (ed). *Desperate Praise. The Australians in Vietnam*, Artlook, Perth, 1982. For an analysis of Australian fiction from the war, see Robin Gerster. "Occidental tourists: the ugly Australian in Vietnam War narrative", and Peter Pierce. "Australian and American literature of the Vietnam War", both in Peter Pierce, Jeffrey Grey & Jeff Doyle (eds). *Vietnam Days*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1991; see also Peter Pierce. "The Funny Place': Australian literature and the War in Vietnam", in this volume, pp. 98-108.

¹⁶ Ian McNeill. *The Team. Australian Army Advisers in Vietnam, 1962-1972*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1984.

¹⁷ Bob Breen. *First to Fight-Australian Diggers, NZ Kiwis and US Paratroopers in Vietnam 1965-66*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1988.

¹⁸ D.M. Horner. SAS. *Phantoms of the Jungle. A history of the Special Air Service*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1990.

¹⁹ J.C. Blaxland. *Organising an Army: The Australian Experience 1957-1965*, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Canberra, 1989.

²⁰ D.M. Horner. *Australian Higher Command in the Vietnam War*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence 40, The Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 1986.

²¹ Frank Frost. *Australia's War in Vietnam*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1987.

²² The major countervailing view will be advanced by the official history, to be published in the mid-1990s. A foretaste may be had through Ian McNeill. "The Australian Army and the Vietnam War", in Peter Pierce, *et al* (eds). *Vietnam Days*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1991.

²³ Conscription was enacted in 1943, but for domestic political reasons was hedged with so many qualifications that in effect Australian conscripts did not serve outside the south-west Pacific Area. The emotional edge which conscription for overseas service possesses in Australia is another legacy of the First World War.

²⁴ Some 17,000 of the 50,000 Australians who served in Vietnam were national servicemen, or conscripts. See Jane Ross. "The Australian Army—Some Views from the Bottom", *Australian Quarterly*, 46:3, 1974, pp. 35-47; "The Conscript Experience in Vietnam", *Australian Outlook*, 29:3, 1975, pp. 315-322; "Australian Soldiers in Vietnam: Product and Performance", in Peter King (ed). *Australia's Vietnam. Australia in the Second Indochina War*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1983, pp. 72-99.

²⁵ The only study of conscription and government policy is Henry S. Albinski, *Politics and Foreign Policy in Australia: the impact of Vietnam and conscription*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 1970, which was written without access to official records and before the end of the Australian commitment.

²⁶ Work by participants includes Barry York. "Police, students and dissent: Melbourne, 1966-1972", *Journal of Australian Studies*, 14, May 1984, pp. 58-76; K. Maddock. "Opposing the war in Vietnam—the Australian experience", in John Dumbrell (ed). *Vietnam and the Antiwar Movement. An International Perspective*, Avebury, London, 1989; Michael E. Hamel-Green. "The resisters: a history of the anti-conscription movement, 1964-1972", in Peter King (ed). *Australia's Vietnam*, 1983, pp. 100-28; Charlotte Clutterbuck. "Protests and Peace Marches: From Vietnam to Palm Sunday", in Kenneth Maddock & Barry Wright (eds). *War: Australia and Vietnam*, Harper & Row, Sydney, 1987, pp. 135-147.

²⁷ See Malcolm Saunders. "The ALP's Response to the Anti-Vietnam War Movement: 1965-73", *Labour History*, 44, May 1983, pp. 75-91; and "'Law and Order' and the Anti-Vietnam War Movement: 1965-72", *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 28:3, 1982, pp. 367-79; Hugh Smith. "Conscience, Law and the State: Australia's Approach to Conscientious Objection since 1901", *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 35:1, 1989, pp. 13-28; and "Conscientious Objection to Particular Wars: Australia's Experience during the Vietnam War, 1965-1972", *War & Society*, 8:1, May 1990; Kim Beazley. "Federal Labor and the Vietnam Commitment", in Peter King (ed). *Australia's Vietnam*, 1983, pp. 36-55.

²⁸ Peter King (ed). *Australia's Vietnam*, 1983.

²⁹ Gregory Pemberton (ed). *Vietnam Remembered*, Weldon, Sydney, 1990.

³⁰ On the absorption of Indochinese migrants see Nancy Viviani. *The Long Journey: Vietnamese migration and settlement in Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1984.

³¹ The literature on veterans is scattered and patchy. For some of the arguments, and a guide to the literature, see Jeffrey Grey. "Anzac, Vietnam and the veteran", in Peter Pierce, *et al* (eds). *Vietnam Days*, 1991; and Jane Ross. "Australia's Legacy. The Vietnam Veterans", in Gregory Pemberton (ed). *Vietnam Remembered*, 1990, pp. 187-213.