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Policy Contradictions of the Australian Task Force, Vietnam, 1966

Terry Burstall

Introduction

The dispatch of a two battalion Task Force to Phuoc Tuy Province South Vietnam in 1966 was a progression from the 1962 commitment to South Vietnam of a small team of military advisers. As the internal military and political situation of the Government of South Vietnam deteriorated from 1960, so United States military support increased. As American support grew it became increasingly important for other countries to be seen to be in agreement with United States actions and objectives in Vietnam not only verbally but also physically. Correspondingly the size of the small team of Australian advisers was increased to 83 by the end of 1964, and in April 1965 Australia responded willingly to United States requests for more support by announcing the commitment of a combat battalion to South Vietnam. In 1966, in line with further United States troop level increases, the Australian force was increased to a self contained two battalion Task Force to be based in Phuoc Tuy Province, 60 mile east of Saigon.

Although the Australian Government supported the United States' actions in Vietnam, it was apparent from 1962 that active support would be curtailed by domestic political and organizational realities in Australia. Political reality lay in the fact that the involvement was not based upon a bi-partisan decision of the Australian Parliament, and that it did not depend on tested electoral support from Australian voters.¹ The organizational reality was the size and quality of the forces that could be sent to Vietnam. As the Australian Army in 1965 only consisted of four battalions it required a major re-organization and upgrading to prepare for a commitment to Vietnam. By necessity the Australian force had to remain extremely small in relation to the rapidly increasing United States effort.

The disparity of size of the two countries' commitments meant that if Australian forces remained closely tied to United States forces they could only be minor players in a much larger effort and would of necessity have to be under direct United States command. To achieve some autonomy of command it was therefore considered desirable in 1966 to move the Task Force to an area where it could establish an Australian national presence. The Australian command could then make its own policy decisions, maintain its own unit integrity and apply its own tactics while still being incorporated, and able to work within, overall United States command.

This article will examine two policy decisions made by the Australian Task Force in 1966 which locked it into postures that were impossible to move away from in the following years of the involvement. The two areas to be examined are: the policies toward sections of the civilian population of the province; and the creation of a large defended base camp. This article will argue that these decisions seriously affected: 1) Australian and United States capacity to win the population to the side of the Government of Vietnam; and 2) the capacity of the Australians to work within United States operational concepts and strategies.

Background

Australian involvement in Vietnam was primarily an attempt to secure an insurance policy with the United States of America should Australian interests be challenged in southeast Asia. The surge of nationalism sweeping the world during the 1950s and 1960s, the impending withdrawal of British troops from "East of Suez" and the perceived spectre of a communist and antagonistic Indonesia aligned with China, meant the Australian Government willingly embraced the policies of the United States in southeast Asia as a means of securing military aid in its own time of need.

As the United States involvement in Vietnam increased from 1960, Australia responded to requests for visible moral support. In 1962 a small Army Training Team component of 30 men flew to Vietnam and was placed under United States command, officially to be used in a training role only. By 1964, in response to United States pressure, this component was increased to 83 and their role had been expanded to include participation in combat situations.

Due to the run down of the Australian Army at that time and the extra pressures placed on Australia's expanding training base because of the introduction of National Service (the draft), it was impossible to increase the numbers of Training Team personnel to meet United States demands. The decision was made therefore in December 1964 to offer instead a battalion of combat troops. At the time, this offer was inappropriate because the United States had no combat units in Vietnam and a battalion could not have been incorporated into their military structure. However, with the landing of the Marines at Da Nang in March 1965, and the subsequent arrival of other United States units, the Australian offer of a battalion became a viable proposition.

The First Battalion

The First Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment was sent to Vietnam in May/June 1965 and became part of the United States 173rd Airborne Brigade based at Bien Hoa airbase. However, placing the battalion with the 173rd created problems for both the United States and Australian commanders in Vietnam. The concept and role of the battalion laid down by the Australian Army and the Government in

Canberra was restricted originally to securing military installations and supporting South Vietnamese or United States forces under attack. This role was not flexible enough for General Westmoreland (Commander, United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam). Difficulties arose in July when the Australian battalion was prohibited from participating in a 173rd Brigade operation by the Australian Chief of Staff.² The role of the force was later expanded and by the end of 1965 the Australians were permitted to engage in offensive operations in the whole of III (Three) Corps area.

Tension still remained, however, as the Australians were not impressed with the United States style of combat operations, neither with respect to their methods of continuous resupply nor with the apparent disregard by United States officers of their own level of casualties. By the end of 1965 it was apparent that the circumstances facing the First Battalion were not the best possible for the Australian forces, not only from the Australian perspective but also from Westmoreland's.

Westmoreland used the 173rd Brigade as his mobile reserve, which meant that they had to be able to move to any part of South Vietnam as required. In June 1966 he was considering sending the 173rd to Darlac Province in II (Two) Corps on the Cambodian border, and recorded: "These troops will be moving constantly and their operations will be in support of ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam], RF/PF [Regional Force and Popular Force] and CIDG [Civil Irregular Defence Group] units."³ To be left short of a battalion because of Australian refusal to allow their forces to move to a certain area was unacceptable to the United States. That there were also tensions arising from the Australian perspective was made clear when the Australian Army Department Secretary was reported to have said: "We found ourselves in Bien Hoa with the United States forces on one side and the Vietnamese on the other and we quickly decided that the best place to be was somewhere else."⁴

By March 1966 it had been decided that Australia would increase the size of its commitment and send to Vietnam a self-contained Task Force of two battalions to replace the First Battalion which was due to return home in June 1966. This was a calculated gamble because a two battalion Task Force was not a balanced force according to contemporary military doctrine, which held that a Task Force should be at least three battalions, giving it the ability to have two battalions in the field and one operating as base defence. Having only two battalions meant that of the 4500 Australian troops in Vietnam at any one time, less than half were combat troops—infantry and supporting arms—and operations would be limited to one battalion strength.

Planning the move to Phuoc Tuy

Lieutenant General John Wilton, the Chief of the General Staff, and a party of service personnel flew from Australia to Saigon for discussions with General Westmoreland on the role and placement of the Task Force in March 1966. Discussions on the placement had already taken place between General Westmoreland and the Commander of Australian Army Force Vietnam (COMAAFV), Brigadier O.D. Jackson, and agreement was reached on Phuoc Tuy Province.⁵ Jackson commented that, "we were to be used somewhere where we could do the job and it would suit our ability. This area of the north [Demilitarized Zone] was to be left as I understood it to the the Americans and the Vietnamese."⁶ He went on to say:

They [the United States] had some difficulty with foreign troops and they weren't too sure how things would work out. I think Westmoreland was happy to have us in a place where we could do things our way and not be exposed in the early days to heavy casualties, which was made pretty clear to me [from Australia] just wasn't on.⁷

General Wilton had already decided tentatively upon Phuoc Tuy before he arrived in Vietnam in March 1966, mainly because of the deep water port at Vung Tau and the fact that the Australian force would be well away from the northern demilitarized zone.⁸ Westmoreland was by then in agreement with the move to Phuoc Tuy and wanted the Australians to work in the eastern portion of the Rung Sat and provide protection for Highway 15, running from the port of Vung Tau to Saigon. The Australian force was to be part of the US II (Two) Field Force Vietnam which was headquartered at Long Binh in the adjoining Bien Hoa Province, and whose responsibility was the whole of the Vietnamese III (Three) Corps.⁹

Preparing for the Australian Arrival

In April 1966 Westmoreland sent elements of the 1st Infantry Division, accompanied by the Australian First Battalion, into Phuoc Tuy on Operation ABILENE. It was not a resounding success as only light contacts were made for most of the operation. The main force units of the Viet Cong (VC) 9 and 5 Divisions were out of the province when the operation was launched and only started moving back as it finished. The only major action of the operation was the attack on a United States unit on the night of 11-12 April. The VC 800 Battalion of the 274 Regiment launched three attacks on a United States position in an attempt to overrun the perimeter, but were repulsed each time with the help of heavy artillery barrages that pounded 1086 rounds into the area during the night. The casualty figures are indicative of the overall tempo of ABILENE. During the 16 day operation United States casualties were 39 killed, 97 wounded, none missing. The action during the night of 11-12

April resulted in 34 killed and 72 wounded, leaving casualties for the rest of the force and the operation at five killed and 25 wounded. VC casualties for the operation were 67 KIA and five captured.¹⁰

In May Westmoreland sent the 173rd to Phuoc Tuy on Operation HARDIHOOD to clear the area prior to the Australian arrival. When the Australian Fifth Battalion arrived in the area the 173rd then went south on Operation HOLLANDIA, into the paddy area of Long My, and carried out their first night airborne landing. HOLLANDIA was not a good operation for the 173rd, for although they encountered very little opposition their casualties were relatively high: nine killed and 68 wounded, mainly from booby traps, against four VC killed, by body count, four possible and four captured.¹¹ Summing up, the "Commander's Analysis" noted: "It is unlikely that the VC elements in the area constitute a single force of greater than company strength".¹²

The Australians at Nui Dat, Phuoc Tuy Province

By 14 June 1966 the Fifth and Sixth Battalions of the Royal Australian Regiment, plus supporting units and Task Force Headquarters, had arrived at the Nui Dat base. The base was to cover a large area of over two square kilometres of mainly rubber plantation and included the small hill, Nui Dat. Highway 2 on the western edge of the base was closed to the local people except at designated periods. The layout of the area created many defensive problems, chiefly because of the large unmanned gap along the western side. Brigadier Jackson, the new Task Force commander, thought he could fill this gap with a third battalion, but it was to be another 18 months before a third battalion arrived. Jackson's rationale for taking such a large area was that it provided the units with room to fight should the base ever be attacked. Although it gave room to fight, the large area created enormous problems from its inception because of the number of troops required to secure the perimeter, effectively cutting down on operational capability.

With the perimeters established the Task Force was then faced with the formidable job of trying to build the area into a defensive position, as well as attempting to mount operations. One of the key elements of the Australian strategy was to create a buffer zone or "cordon sanitaire" around the base out to 4000 metres (just over two-and-a-half miles), except for the southern end where the large village of Hoa Long was located at a distance of less than 1000 metres (about two-thirds of a mile) from the perimeter. This buffer zone was to be kept clear of civilians and to be dominated by saturation patrolling, hoping thereby to deny enemy forces intelligence and forming-up areas from which to launch an attack on the base. The rubber plantation was kept intact with a minimum of clearing, and no lights were allowed at night. The open area on the western side was covered by fire from both the high ground of Nui Dat and the armoured personnel carriers (APCs) area which straddled both sides of the road on the southern section. Artillery was

situated at the southern entrance and could bring fire to bear on most of the perimeter. The base was declared off limits to all civilians in the area. Local leave close to the base was prohibited; any leave was to be taken in the port city of Vung Tau, 30 kilometres (18 miles) to the south, where a large Australian logistic base was set up and from which supplies for Nui Dat were transported by road, with a contingency plan for aerial resupply if required.

From the military perspective the plan was quite sound. Unfortunately in the Vietnamese context it was full of contradictions, and placed the Australian force not only in conflict with the local population but also with General Westmoreland.

The Australians and the Local People

Contrary to what the Australian military historian and then Intelligence Officer with 5RAR, Robert O'Neill, has written, the positioning of the Australian base did not take into consideration the needs of the local population.¹³ There was considerable dislocation of both the economic and social structure of the province because of the establishment of the base, which in turn created considerable animosity toward the Australians from the beginning.

The United States and Australian forces' major problem during their Vietnam intervention was the calibre of the government they were there to assist. Australian Army publications had made the point in a study of counter-revolutionary warfare that the first requirement for success was a competent civilian government.¹⁴ It would be impossible, under any criteria, to call the governments of South Vietnam since 1954 competent, especially that of mid-1966 when the "Struggle Movement" had President Ky more concerned with fighting his own generals than the VC. Because the central government was largely corrupt and incompetent, the governmental support required to consolidate military actions was not in place. Therefore the policies of creating clear areas and resettling population that worked for Robert Thompson in Malaya, where the British were the government *and* the army, had no validity in Vietnam. Thompson's methods of clear areas and resettlement were not viable options for the Australian and United States forces in Vietnam, as neither the governmental backup required for relief of hardship following resettlement, nor the political will to show that the military policies had some legitimate rationale existed.

When the Australians arrived in Phuoc Tuy they established the base camp at Nui Dat adjacent to a densely populated area. To achieve the aim of the 4000 metre buffer zone required the movement of 8000 people, almost ten per cent of the province population. Inside the 4000 metre buffer zone (excluding Hoa Long) were two villages, Long Phuoc and Long Tan, with a population together of approximately 4000 people. In addition to this there were the many people living on small plots of land inside the area. All of these small landholders were forcibly moved from

their homes and told to relocate in the nearby towns. This movement of the population has been described by all military writers of the period so far as a "resettlement", a highly ambiguous usage since it implies that the people were helped. This was not the case in Phuoc Tuy in 1966.

The village of Hoa Long, although inside the 4000 metre area, was allowed to remain, but the villages of Long Tan (approximately 1000 people) and Long Phuoc (approximately 3000 people) were evacuated and subsequently destroyed. The people from Long Tan had been forced from their village by ARVN forces, assisted by United States troops, during ABILENE in April, and the people of Long Phuoc by the 173rd Brigade in May. The people of Long Tan were forced into the towns of Dat Do and Long Dien, while those from Long Phuoc were moved to Hoa Long, Long Dien, and some to Dat Do. This relocation, it was presumed, made the task of population control easier since the people were concentrated in villages under some semblance of ARVN control. Once moved these people were then forgotten by the Australian forces and received no help in the re-establishment of their homes or modes of life.¹⁵

It would be naive to suggest that these people were not an Australian responsibility on the grounds that it was not the Australians who actually forced them from their areas. The plan for the Australian base was well in place before ABILENE and the displacement of the population of Long Tan. When the United States forces left, the people tried to return to their homes but were forbidden by the implementation of Australian policy. Their village was then destroyed by a combination of artillery and neglect. With their only source of income denied them they became beggars, exploited labour, or at best poor relations for those lucky enough to have relatives in Dat Do or Long Dien. The inhabitants of Long Phuoc received worse treatment. Where the Long Tan villagers had time to take many of their possessions, the Long Phuoc villagers had been shifted from their village during the 173rd Brigade's operation in May 1966, but only so that the brigade could operate through the village. They were not evacuated to become refugees. The 173rd "After Action" report from HARDIHOOD states: "Refugees 0". When the Australians continued HARDIHOOD they first closed the area and then in late June proceeded to destroy the village. This was a house-by-house destruction of substantial structures made of brick, dressed timber and tiles. Australian records state that 537 dwellings were destroyed. Dwellings were physically pulled down and all the villagers' possessions burnt. These included cooking and eating utensils, bedding, clothing, school books, photographs, family ornaments and farming implements. The fields, fruit trees and gardens were defoliated, remaining off-limits until September when the people were allowed back to work their ground for only two days a week under strict curfew conditions. There is no record of how these people survived the initial move, but the Task Force Civil Affairs officer states that he knew that some of the people from Long Phuoc went into Hoa Long, and that: "There was no work for them and

they were just hanging around Hoa Long. They weren't starving but they were pretty bloody hungry and they were dirt poor . . . I cried tears for them, believe you me."¹⁶

As the Task Force was short of infantry, drastic measures were initiated in order to keep the civilians away from the closed areas. One of these measures was the deliberate firing of artillery onto local people who were seen going into the areas. Messages from the Task Force signal log (Table 1) show that there was a disregard for the safety of the civilian population in order to enforce policy. Although the messages cited below are for September 1966, there are many similar instances throughout the records for 1966 and 1967.

It would be possible to excuse this policy if there had been no need for the people to go back to their old areas, but the people had no option; they had to return in order to survive because no help was given to them. If cattle strayed they would naturally have gone back to their old areas. Therefore the people had to retrieve them. If they did, they ran the

Table 1 ¹⁷

Serial	Date	Time	From	Message
48	12	0730	AVN	Two buildings under construction in Long Tan 488659.489657. Arty [artillery] to fire some rounds.
111	13	1105	ALO	3 people at Long Phuoc heading north on trail 50 metres from road. They are carrying baskets on poles. G[round] R[eference] 452651. Arty engaged. Smoke followed by H[igh]E[xplosive].
113	13	1120	ALO	3 cattle 461659 North of road, west of river between Long Tan and Long Phuoc. 470654 people (2) working fields. Engaged by artillery.
114	13	1132	ALO	Herd of cattle at 465653. Engaged by artillery.
789	25	1242	ALO	Numerous people in Long Phuoc on main road travelling both east and west. Engaged by artillery.
923	28	1209	ALO	People walking east into Long Phuoc YS 438639. 15 cattle and one man at 469654. 8 people/cattle south of Long Tan 485652 moving north. Remarks. Arty engaged.

[ALO stands for Air Liaison Officer, which was the small army spotter plane that flew over the area reporting movements.]

risk of being killed; if they did not then it was almost certain that their cattle would be killed, and their last remaining possessions lost.

Although the forced relocation of civilians and the creation of “free fire” zones became an accepted procedure for all Free World Forces in Vietnam, it was in direct contravention of policies laid down by the Australian Army in 1965. *The Division In Battle* pamphlet states:

The principles of humanity prohibit the use of any degree of violence not actually necessary for the purpose of the war. War is not an excuse for ignoring established humanitarian principles. To a large extent these principles have been given concrete form in the law of war; but because all of these principles have not become legal rules, a military commander should consider whether a proposed course of action would be inhumane even though not prohibited by international law.¹⁸

“Principles of humanity” were ignored with respect to the 8000 people who had once resided and earned their living in the area taken over by the Australians, and a “degree of violence not actually necessary for the purpose of the war”, was inflicted on them. The relocation and the subsequent abandonment of responsibility for the 8000 people affected by the positioning of the Task Force, in addition to the policy of dumping VC bodies in town market squares or dragging them behind APCs in sight of the village children, both methods supposedly meant to draw out further VC sympathisers, did nothing to help the Australian, United States or South Vietnamese cause in Phuoc Tuy. Attempts at civic action, such as building school rooms, a Boy Scout hall, or a new market, none of which the people wanted, were not enough to overcome the animosity caused by the destruction of homes and livelihoods. Further, with the implementation of later policies of arresting ARVN draft dodgers, the continual “cordon-and-search” of villages, the arrest and handing over to South Vietnamese authorities of VC “suspects”, who were then badly treated and confined sometimes for months, it is easy to understand why Hoa Long, situated less than 1000 metres from the front gate of the Australian base, was never considered pacified. Hoa Long remained a village of women, children and old men and offered resistance for the whole period of the Australian presence. In 1971, five years after the Australians moved to Phuoc Tuy in May 1966, it was recorded that in Hoa Long:

Security is only a little better [than 1966] and far from satisfactory, due to the still predominant anti-GVN [Government of Vietnam] feeling . . . Agent reports from Hoa long indicate that there is some form of VC activity inside the hamlet every night.¹⁹

The policies adopted by the Australians in 1966 alienated them from the very people from whom they needed support if the war was ever to be brought to the conclusion which the United States and Australia

desired. The VC could not survive without the help of the people, and yet through their first actions in Phuoc Tuy the Australian Task Force had alienated almost ten per cent of the population. It is certain that those who may have been neutral before the Australians arrived did not remain so after the treatment afforded them.

Australian Military Policies

According to Brigadier Jackson, the first Task Force commander, Westmoreland's orders to him were to, "take over Phuoc Tuy. Those were the only tactical orders I had from anyone."²⁰ From the evidence available it would seem that the General Westmoreland's idea of "take over Phuoc Tuy" was very different from Brigadier Jackson's. The latter's plan was to move into the area of Nui Dat, establish a large fortified camp adjacent to the main population centres and show the local population and the VC that the Australians were there to stay. The original intention was to establish the base and slowly expand the area of control, disrupting VC bases and lines of communications and eventually cutting off the VC from the population in short "pacification".

The problem with this concept was that it was not United States policy at that time. It is not an aim of this article to attempt to analyze which policy would have been the more appropriate or successful in relation to the Vietnam conflict. Rather, since the Australians were part of an American Field Force the wishes of the senior American commander in the theatre would have to have been taken into account. General Westmoreland's policy in 1966 was for United States and Free World Forces to be "manoeuvre battalions", which were to engage and kill enemy "main force" units while the ARVN together with United States advisors carried out the pacification and nation-building roles. He did not envisage that Free World Forces would be involved in pacification: "COMUSMACV's [General Westmoreland] instructions to his commanders were to 'undertake operations which will find, fix and destroy Viet Cong (VC) forces by sustained and aggressive actions'."²¹

This difference in interpretation of role is apparent when one considers, first, that the Australians established their base adjacent to the populated centres, but had no authority in those areas, since they were the responsibility of the Vietnamese province chief and his United States advisers, and second, that Australian forces could not mount operations which penetrated the populated areas without the permission of the province chief.

Whatever Westmoreland's interpretation of the role, it is doubtful that the Australian Government would have been prepared to accept the political costs which a more offensive strategy and possibly higher casualties would have entailed. Consideration must also be given to the operational reality that the Australians did not have the capacity to work to Westmoreland's concept because of the lack of both front line troops and available equipment. Because the perimeter of the base covered such a large area, a full battalion was required to man it, but even this

was not really adequate at that time because there was little barbed wire available and no weapon pits had been dug. Spare parts for APCs and personal weapons for troops were at a minimum, and when some patrols went out there were not enough machine guns remaining within the perimeter for adequate base defence. In addition relations between the Royal Australian Air Force and the Army were strained and command problems took several months to be resolved, all of which added to base defence inadequacies.

Rather than being used to mount extensive offensive operations against main force VC units, the first four months of the Australian force's time were taken up by a continual battle against the elements during the wet season, a battle aggravated by supply shortages and inter-service rivalries. Despite this, the patrols and close operations were almost continuous with one battalion out while the other manned the base. The battalion manning the base was not confined to a static role but had fighting patrols and ambushes constantly on the move. The building of the base progressed virtually by hand labour, meaning that troops received no rest between operations. Brigadier Jackson, the Task Force Commander, wrote in August that "the pace of operations is beginning to tell and there are indications that the infantry are becoming very fatigued both physically and mentally . . . Recreational facilities are inadequate".²²

The continual patrolling, the "cordon-and-search" of villages, and the operations into suspected enemy base areas continued for the rest of the year. However, this was only local activity, as the Australians went no further than 30 kilometres (18 miles) from the base. Although VC base areas and lines of communications were disrupted, only small groups of enemy were encountered, except for two clashes that were enemy initiated. During December the Task Force was called upon by II Field Force Vietnam to participate in Operation DUCK as security for part of Highway 15, while the 9th Infantry Division moved from the port of Vung Tau to Long Thanh (Bear Cat). In view of the fact that the security of Highway 15 was one of the specific roles Westmoreland had envisaged for the Australians it seems strange that Brigadier Jackson should describe operations to secure it as "flashes in the pan".²³ He recorded later that "our ability to conduct offensive operations against the VC in December was severely limited by road security operations."²⁴

There were only two major actions involving the Australian force during 1966, and both were enemy initiated. The first was in July during Operation HOBART, when the Australian Sixth Battalion encountered elements of the local force D445 Battalion, which attacked and almost over-ran one of the Australian companies, "hugging" to avoid the artillery fire. The VC unit engaged the Australian company for over an hour despite the heavy artillery barrage brought down amongst them. VC losses for the action were six killed by body count, while the Australians lost two dead and 12 wounded. Several other small clashes occurred

during the five day operation and the final casualties were nine VC by body count, with Australian casualties at three dead and 19 wounded.

The other major action occurred in August when a company patrol of Sixth Battalion walked into a major VC ambush in a rubber plantation near the deserted village of Long Tan, only 2,500 metres (less than two miles) from the Task Force base. Nui Dat base had been mortared in the early hours of 17 August and B Company, Sixth Battalion, had been sent out at first light to investigate. D Company was sent to relieve them on the following day. On meeting and relieving B company, D company moved into the Long Tan rubber plantation and 30 minutes later, as they moved toward the eastern side of the plantation, the ambush was initiated. One Australian platoon (30 men) was cut off, but the ensuing constant movement of the rest of the company over a wide area of the plantation while trying to relieve this platoon proved one of the factors that saved the Australians. Others may have been the weather and sustained supporting fire; visibility was cut to 100 metres by fierce rain storms and artillery pounded into the enemy positions. D company was finally relieved after a tense four hour battle, when an Australian relief force of APC mounted infantry firing heavy machine guns moved into the plantation in the dark.

An official body count of 245 VC has been recorded, but Socialist Republic of Vietnam authorities refute this count and say around 150 were killed, and those mainly due to artillery.²⁵ The Australian losses were 18 killed and 26 wounded. Vietnamese sources say that the action was initiated both to stop the Australian policy of destruction in the province and to show support for the people of the displaced villages of Long Phuoc and Long Tan.²⁶

The battle brought home to the Australians that the war was more than a counter-insurgency conflict. Major re-organization was initiated, from senior command down to re-assessing the ammunition "states" for infantry riflemen. Ammunition "states" had previously been 60 rounds of rifle ammunition per rifleman and 200 rounds per machine gun, inadequate levels of supply in circumstances such as the extensive contact at Long Tan; this fact alone gives an indication of the Australian knowledge and perception of the situation in Vietnam. The major impact of Long Tan was the realization that battalion operations would, from then on, have to function in tighter formations, meaning that operations of battalion size would cover even smaller areas than previously and could moreover never move outside artillery range. Command of APCs was given "unequivocally" to the infantry commander and a "ready reaction company" was always to be on hand in the Task Force area, tying up even more troops in static situations. For the rest of the year the Australians continued to work slowly outwards from the base at Nui Dat, but did not make contact with other than small local force units.

The year 1966 ended with the Australians committing themselves to the development of a larger base camp which required a greater number of troops to man, so cutting down on operational efficiency. Not

surprisingly the operations undertaken by the Australians following this expansionary move were not of the kind Westmoreland had envisaged; Australians were not confronting main force units in their base areas and sanctuaries, but conducting pacification operations within their own Tactical Area of Responsibility (TAOR). In February 1967 Westmoreland visited the Australian Task Force in Phuoc Tuy and confronted the Australian commanders about what he considered the poor results achieved by the force:

I then departed for the Australian Task Force where I called on Brigadier Graham, the new commander, for the first time. The Australians are very inactive and I learned they are about to rotate their two battalions which means they will be virtually ineffective for over a month. Out of a 4,600 man force they are able to put only six companies into the field. They have a large base to defend which requires two companies [at least]. I expressed to Brigadier Graham my disappointment and subsequently in talking to the Australian Ambassador, to General Mackay upon his departure, and to General Vincent upon his arrival, I expressed my concern that very little combat power was being generated by the 4,600 man force. Furthermore, I suggested that they might want to change their unit rotation policy which I thought would allow them to increase their combat power with the same total number of troops and at the same time have them in a fighting posture for twelve months. The Australians were a little shocked at my comments but I explained in all fairness to the command and to their reputation, this observation should be known.²⁷

Several months later this difference in interpretation of role between the American and Australian commands was noted again.

Military operations are not evaluated though it should be noted that the Australians have been extremely effective in securing an area through intensive day and night operations within their TAOR [Tactical Area Of Responsibility] . . . However, the primary mission of the Australian Force is to carry out offensive operations against the enemy, rather than engage in territorial pacification missions.²⁸

Despite these criticisms from the senior command of which they were a part, the Australians remained within the confines of Phuoc Tuy until January 1968. There were only two major actions in 1967, and again these were enemy initiated.

Conclusions

When Australia committed forces to South Vietnam in 1962 the military aim was motivated by the self-interested political hope of securing a United States presence in southeast Asia. During the period of the involvement the rationale remained the same. South Vietnam and

its people were only important to Australia as appendages of the United States. Policy decisions of the Australian Army were tied more to national political need than overall strategic thought and were ad hoc in nature. The Australians had to make decisions in haste in order to keep pace with the rapid American escalation. The true nature of the war could not be addressed because this was contrary to the supposed rationale for being involved. Australian soldiers and the public were told that the people of South Vietnam wanted to be protected from the forces of the revolutionary movement; this in fact was far from the case. Many families in the south had members fighting with, or supporting, the Viet Cong, especially in the countryside where there was little loyalty to the government in Saigon. Therefore the policy decisions which reflected the belief that the people wanted and appreciated the allied presence were doomed to failure because in practice they were not based upon a realistic analysis of the situation.

The decisions taken on the location and size of the base at Nui Dat are examples of this faulty analysis. The Nui Dat base locked the Australian force into a position from which it was impossible to move in the following years of involvement. The support of a large proportion of the province's population was lost in 1966 and was never won back. The forced movement of 8000 people and the destruction of their homes and livelihoods without any attempt at compensation by the Australians or the Government of South Vietnam permanently alienated a large proportion of the province population. The support of the people for their own government and its allies was essential if the conflict was ever to achieve the conclusion desired by that government, the United States and Australia alike, yet the first actions of the Australians in Phuoc Tuy had the opposite effect. Later actions, such as the dumping of bodies in the market squares, the prohibitions on land use and the arresting and handing over to the South Vietnamese of ARVN draft dodgers, increased the animosity toward the Australian presence.

The size and complexity of the base and the waste of manpower its defence entailed were givens that later Task Force commanders had no option but to accept. The base restricted the mobility of combat forces and the overall combat ability of the Australian effort by tying up men and equipment in static defence roles. The cost of the Australian effort could have been cut in half and better results achieved in line with COMUSMACV's policies by placing the battalions and supporting arms in the base complex of the Logistic Support Base at Vung Tau. The battalions would then have been free to move on operations into any part of the eastern section of III Corps without having to be concerned for the security of an exposed rear area. They would have been able to fit more easily into General Westmoreland's concept of "manoeuvre battalions" and perhaps have played a distinctive role in II Field Force combat operations that were mounting in intensity during 1966.

¹ In 1965-1966 these questions had not been put to the electorate, although successive Morgan-Gallup polls in the early days of the Vietnam involvement did show general public support. Later elections in which the Liberal Party (conservative) was returned to government demonstrated a voter-based mandate for continuing involvement.

² Lieutenant-General Stanley Robert Larsen & Brigadier-General James Lawton Collins, Jr. *Allied Participation In Vietnam*, Department of the Army, Washington D.C., 1975, pp. 89-90.

³ *Westmoreland Papers*, National Archives, Washington D.C., Record Group 319, Box 28.

⁴ *The Bulletin*, 12 November 1966, p. 15.

⁵ Brigadier David Jackson. *Interview*, 29 January 1988.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ General Alan Stretton. *Interview*, 16 January 1988.

⁹ *Command History United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam 1966*, National Archives, Washington D.C., Record Group 472, p. 93.

¹⁰ *Combat After Action Report, Operation Abilene*, Record Group 472, National Archives, Washington D.C., pp. 1-68.

¹¹ *Combat After Action Report, Operation Hollandia*, National Archives, Washington D.C., Record Group 472, p. 22.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 24

¹³ Robert O'Neill. *Vietnam Task. The 5th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, 1966-67*, Cassell Australia Ltd., Melbourne, 1968, p. 30.

¹⁴ *The Division in Battle*, Pamphlet No 11, *Counter Revolutionary Warfare 1965*, Military Board, Canberra 1965, p. 73.

¹⁵ Jackson. *Interview*.

¹⁶ Major John Donohoe (Civil Affairs Officer, Australian Task Force, July 1966-May 1967). *Interview*, 30 June 1988.

¹⁷ *Australian War Memorial 181 : "Herbicide Series"*, Message Forms, Commander's Diaries, 1-30 September 1966, Box 2. Hereafter references to the above will be cited as *AWM 181*.

¹⁸ *The Division In Battle*, pamphlet, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

¹⁹ *AWM 181*. Headquarters First Australian Task Force, Item "Province Survey Phuoc Tuy Province", Hoa Long Ground Team Report, 13-17 April 1971, pp. 1-5.

²⁰ Jackson. *Interview*.

²¹ *Command History United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam 1966*, National Archives, Washington D.C., Record Group 472, pp. 1-2.

²² *AWM 181*. Commander's Diaries, 1-31 August 1966.

²³ Jackson. *Interview*.

²⁴ *AWM 181*, *op.cit.*, Commander's Diaries, 1-31 January 1967.

²⁵ Senior Colonel (ret) Nguyen Thanh Hong. *Interview*, Bien Hoa City, Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 10 November 1987. Hong was in charge of VC forces at the battle.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Westmoreland Personal Papers, 1962-1972*, Record Group 319, Box 29, National Archives, Washington D.C., unpaginated.

²⁸ *Evaluation Report, Australian Task Force - Phuoc Tuy*, August 1967, Records of the United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam, Free World Military Force Advisor, Command Reporting Files, 1966, 334-77-0069, "Australia - Misc. Correspondence", Record Group 334, National Archives, Washington D.C., unpaginated.