"They Were Hard Nuts": The Australians in Vietnam, 1962-1972

A focus on the American failure to make maximum use of the Australians' counterinsurgency tactics in South Vietnam

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Abstract:

Addressing the need for studies examining the relationship between Commonwealth militaries and the American military, this paper examines the American military's relationship with the Australian military contingency sent to Vietnam between 1962 and 1972. Analyzing *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUSA) documents, Australian government documents and Australian primary sources including interviews, papers, and autobiographies, this paper argues that the Americans deliberately used the Australian army in South Vietnam for show rather than force. The paper also illustrates American efforts to discredit and ignore Australian counterinsurgency doctrine and tactics; this undertaking only hindered the overall American anti-communist mission in Vietnam.

Australia

(1) Met all day Sunday
(2) They were hard nuts
(3) They had a long list of their contributions to Vietnam already
(4) Real progress was made with Holt when went upstairs alone and told of the seriousness of the matter
(5) Holt told Taylor that he was such a good salesman that he was glad he had not brought his wife to the meeting

—Dr. Clark Clifford, meeting with President Lyndon B. Johnson
5 August 1967[1]

While the Viet Minh and the French fought each other during the First Indochina War in Vietnam, Australia was fighting a guerilla-style war in Malaysia in what has been dubbed the "Malayan Emergency" of 1948-1960. In October of 1953, the Australian Defence Committee, the New Zealand Chiefs of Staff and the British Chief of the Imperial General Staff met in Melbourne to air concerns regarding the possibility of Chinese aggression in Southeast Asia.[2] The delegation feared Chinese determination for communist control in Southeast Asia, which would threaten the accessibility of strategic raw materials for western powers in the area. The conference concluded with Australia's primary role in a major war shifting towards the defense of Malaya, replacing the Australians' prior commitments to desert warfare and the protection of the Suez Canal. By 1954, the Australians focused on a more prominent role on the mainland of Southeast Asia in connection with their regional allies.[3] The Australian military viewed communist influence in Indochina as a threat that could spread to those who "[shared] a common

[1] U.S. Department of State, "Notes of President's Meeting with Dr. Clark Clifford and General Maxwell Taylor," *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968, Volume V, Vietnam, June-August 1967*, Document 270.
[2] Ian McNeill, *To Long Tan: The Australian Army and the Vietnam War 1950-1966* (St. Leonard's: Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, 1993), 5.
[3] Brigadier F.P Serong, "An Australian View of Revolutionary War," *Conflict Studies*, no. 16 (October 1971): 2; Robert O'Neill, *Australia in the Korea War 1950-53, volume 1.*, (Canberra: Australian War Memorial and the Australian Government Publishing Service, 1981), 346-7 as quoted in McNeill, 5.

frontier in New Guinea." [4] The main fear was that a communist force with sufficient bombing range capability could attack mainland Australia. Ultimately, the theory was that the Australians would fight with conventional forces against conventional enemies closer to home when the time came. However, in reality, the Australians ultimately became a peripheral power used to help neighboring countries against their own communist insurgencies. With the French defeat in 1954 and the increasing American involvement, the Australians viewed Indochina with even more looming concern. Australian Brigadier F. P. Serong described Australia as being in a "between" status; as with Australia's lack of physical borders and with closest neighbors separated by water, there was no "stimulus; no reflexes; no posture of readiness adopted from ingrained, age-long custom."[5] With no immediate need for defense, Australia proactively committed itself to the security and protection of Southeast Asia. To stop the spread of communism into Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand, Australia viewed South Vietnam as a key strategic area for the defense of the rest of Southeast Asia. Even more important, especially in Australia's view, was the future of Malaya, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Fears of the re-emergence of communism in Malaya were credible as the Australians had spent over a decade fighting the communists there. Broadly speaking, the Australians viewed the defense of South Vietnam, Indochina, and Southeast Asia as a way to protect their own continent.

The war in Vietnam was of upmost concern not only for the Australians but also for the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) members. Beyond proximity concerns, these nations, including New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand, viewed

[4] "Defense Policy, The Vote and The Programme," DPC Agendum No. 31, 28 January 1954, AHQ 23/441/55, DD. As quoted in McNeill, 5.
[5] Francis Philip 'Ted' Serong was a Colonel between 1955 and 1968 and then promoted to Brigadier in 1968. Any work mentioned of his, or works mentioning him, will refer to his rank as it was at that time. See Anne Blair, *Ted Serong: The Life of an Australian Counter-Insurgency Expert* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Brigadier F.P Serong, "An Australian View of Revolutionary War," *Conflict Studies*, no. 16 (October 1971): 4, 6.

South Vietnam as "a Protocol State under the SEATO Treaty…[S]ubject to a request by the South Vietnamese Government, the area would be regarded as part of the territory to be defended by SEATO in an emergency."[6] The SEATO treaty called for the participating nations to come to the aid of South Vietnam if asked for assistance. The Australians were eager to support the South Vietnamese and the Americans by announcing on 4 June 1962 the deployment of thirty military advisers and instructors to South Vietnam who were "to provide instruction in jungle warfare, village defense, and related activities."[7] This decision was promoted by the Americans during the Australia, New Zealand, and United States (ANZUS) council meeting of 8-9 May 1962, the first meeting of the council since October 1959. The Americans felt that they had secured Australia's commitment for assistance to South Vietnam by offering to "smooth the way for aid from Australia and New Zealand when [Admiral Felt] visited Vietnam" after the meeting.[8] However, while the Americans would "[dispatch a] military officer to Saigon to discuss just how Australian personnel [could] be used," they saw the potential for Australian involvement in South Vietnam through a different lens.[9]

A predominant western interpretation associated with the Second Indochina War, or simply the Vietnam War as the United States often called it, is that it was solely an "American war." With over 58,000 Americans dead at the conclusion of the war, this view certainly does have its own merits. However, besides Australians, there were South Koreans, New Zealanders, Thai, and Filipino forces, plus the hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese troops in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), fighting on the ground in South Vietnam.

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[6] Australian Defense Committee, Report on *"Defense Implications of Current Situation in Vietnam,"* 20 August 1964: 5.
[7] U.S. Department of State, "Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," *Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963, Volume II, 4 June 1962,* Document 209, p. 436.
[8] U.S. Department of State, "Editorial Note," *Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963, Volume II, Vietnam, 196,* Document 185.
[9] U.S. Department of State, "Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," *Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963, Volume II, 4 June 1962,* Document 209, p. 436.

Statistically, this war was not just an American war but the way in which the Americans conducted it certainly reflects this predominant public interpretation. Ultimately, the Americans failed to take advantage of the counterinsurgency expertise of the Australians by choosing to have the Australians adhere and conform to their own strategy. American tactics primarily relied on the big battalion approach and involved heavy casualties. This also required great logistical support from home and for the battlefront. This approach resulted in two consequences for the Americans: it damaged the American image in Vietnam and it damaged political stability back home.[10] The Americans also viewed their own counterinsurgency doctrine as superior; in some cases, as it will be demonstrated further on, the C.I.A pulled Australian advisers out of their roles because of frustrations with Australian success. From the original thirty Australian advisers sent to South Vietnam in 1962, to the first arrival of an Australian infantry battalion in 1965, to the establishment of the First Australian Task Force in the province of Phuoc Tuy in 1966, and finally to the withdrawal of Australian forces in 1972, the Australians were seen as means to legitimize the American efforts in South Vietnam while little to no consideration was given to their counterinsurgency techniques and tactics. While serving in the Central Highlands in 1963, Australian Captain Barry Petersen noted, "the Americans in the highlands acted as if South Vietnam was their country; their responsibility and theirs alone."[11]

As early as 1963, it was evident that the American desire for Australian assistance was not for counterinsurgency expertise or manpower but to give the American actions in South Vietnam a more well-rounded image in the political arena: "[Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs W. Averell] Harriman stated that any additional assistance which Australia and New Zealand could provide Vietnam would be of great political value as demonstrating

[10] Brigadier F.P. Serong, "Counter-insurgency" (lecture, SEATO Headquarters, Bangkok, Thailand, 1January 1969).
[11] Barry Petersen, *Tiger Men: An Australian's Secret War* (South Melbourne: Macmillan Co. of Australia, 1988), 206.

multilateral support for the Republic of Vietnam."[12] Initially, the Americans viewed the Australians as means to encourage other western nations to join their efforts and thereby produce an image of multilateral support for South Vietnam's cause. More importantly, the Americans viewed the Australians and their contributions to the war efforts in South Vietnam as a counter to the image of a "puppet government" in Saigon. The North Vietnamese had repeatedly described the Saigon government as such, so the Americans were looking to gain more international support so as to legitimize it.

By the end of 1964, the Americans were looking at the Australian contribution in a different light, as they were preparing to increase the number of U.S. ground troops in South Vietnam. The United Kingdom, in fears of triggering a reaction from Moscow, had decided not to commit troops to South Vietnam, leaving the Americans to turn to Australia. The Americans decided to press Australia for even more support but also for "additional contributions," including military support as the Americans were preparing to increase "graduated military pressure directed systematically against the [Democratic Republic of Vietnam]."[13] This graduated military pressure primarily entailed more air strikes but "as such a program would consist…of a weight and tempo adjusted to the situation as it develops and of appropriate U.S. deployments to handle any contingency," the Americans wanted to ensure Australia's commitments to help offset these new efforts against the North Vietnamese. Canberra, still citing SEATO obligations, was willing to continue assisting the Americans especially after the Gulf of Tonkin attacks of 1964. The Australians believed that the attacks "should not go unanswered" and that they "should be invited to concert with their American colleagues upon the

[12] U.S. State Department, "Editorial Note," *Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963,* Document 154.
[13] U.S. State Department, "Paper Prepared by the Executive Committee," *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968, Volume I, Vietnam, 1964, 2 December 1964,* Document 433.

best way in which Australia could give her support."[14] The need for Australian combat troops developed into more pressuring issues as the situation in South Vietnam declined in 1965. Listed under "measures to arrest the deterioration," Australia troops were then considered to run the training centers for South Vietnamese regular forces while President Lyndon B. Johnson urged the Australian government to consider deploying a significant combat element.[15] However, this occasion would remain one of the few instances that the Americans appreciated and accepted Australian assistance outright.

Between 1962 and 1965, the Australians sent thirty advisers to assist with counterinsurgency efforts in South Vietnam; they were dubbed the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV), or simply 'The TEAM.' This group of advisers trained Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF), as well as instructed U.S. advisers in South Vietnam in the art in jungle warfare.[16] By this time, the Australian army had a large number of officers and non-commissioned officers who possessed experience from counterinsurgency operations in Southeast Asia. The Malaya Emergency helped the Australians develop arguably the most productive counter-revolutionary warfare (CRW) doctrine to date in which "[t]hey learned, essentially, that 'the only good counterinsurgency operation is the one that never has to start.'"[17]

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[14] Telegram I.23820 "Aid to Vietnam" from Alan Renouf in the Australian Embassy in Washington D.C. to the Department of External Affairs, 19 July 1964; and Telegram No. AP 83 from Australian Department of External Affairs to Alan Renouf and Australian Embassy in Washington D.C., 5 August 1964.

[15] U.S. State Department, "Johnson Report Outline," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume II, Vietnam, 14 March 1965*, Document 197; U.S. State Department, "National Security Action Memorandum No. 328," *FRUS 1964-1968, Volume II, Vietnam, January-June 1965, 6 April 1965*, Document 242.

[16] Blair, 75.

[17] For the full description of the Counter-Revolutionary Warfare doctrine, see The Australian Army, *The Division in Battle Pamphlet No.11, Counter-Revolutionary Warfare* (Army Headquarters, Canberra, Australia, 1965). Robert O. Tillman argues that comparisons between Vietnam and the Malayan Emergency offer "so few parallels that any attempt to transfer the Malayan experience is at best misleading and naïve, and at worst it is fraught with serious political dangers." While Tillman proposes valid arguments when assessing the political, social, and economic factors in both countries during and after the wars, he does not pay enough attention to the specifics of jungle warfare for him to criticize all comparisons. See Robert O. Tillman, "The Non-Lessons of the Malayan Emergency," *Asian Survey* 6, no. 8 (August 1966): 407-419. Brigadier F.P Serong, "An Australian View of Revolutionary War," *Conflict Studies*, no. 16 (October 1971): 5.

While the Australians were well acquainted with jungle warfare and their doctrine was well tested, they used the CRW as a base that could be adapted to certain situations. The Australians in turn utilized Mao Tse-Tung's concept of the 'People's War' to develop this CRW by reflecting on the three stages Mao mandated. The first step called for the formation of revolutionary cells, followed by the grouping of these cells into platoons, which then conducted military actions against the government. The third and final step entailed revolutionary warfare culminating in conventional-style war. With these three steps in mind and with their experiences in Malaya, the Australian's CRW outlined the development of the causes and the progression of revolutionary warfare in seven steps:

1. Deterioration of economic stability; or disappointment of economic expectations.
2. Deterioration of political stability—general or more probably regional.
3. Police intelligence action—Special Branch.
4. Police political action—arrests of individuals.
5. Police tactical action—against small armed groups.
6. Minor military tactical action—against larger armed groups.
7. Major military tactical action—against an armed, fully organized resistance probably externally supported.[18]

What is notable in this CRW is the Australian's focus on the economic stability of the region. Australian Brigadier F. P. Serong, one of the world's most renowned counterinsurgency experts, argued that to avoid problems in the first step, Australia should maintain a quality and quantity of economic and aid guidance in the region. He and the CRW stressed that a "modest and uniform raising of living standards" would help prevent the problems associated with the first step.[19] If the first step was not resolved, isolation of the population from the guerilla forces then became a crucial aspect of the CRW, and this action was achieved by placing the population under direct control of the government.[20] This direct control of the government needed to come

[18] Ibid, 7.
[19] Brigadier F.P Serong, "An Australian View of Revolutionary War," *Conflict Studies*, no. 16 (October 1971): 10.
[20] Bob Buick, *All Guts and No Glory: the story of a Long Tan Warrior* (St. Leonard's: Allen & Unwin, 2000), 17.

from a competent civilian government that would be able to control and distribute bureaucratic and economic support to the population.[21]

By the time the TEAM arrived in Vietnam, the situation had already reached Step 6 of the CRW. To make matters worse, the CRW was never able to fully develop or materialize in South Vietnam as the Australians sent to the region were placed under United States Army Command. As a result, Australian combat and counterinsurgency efforts were heavily restricted because the Americans sought to retain their style of fighting in South Vietnam. Unfortunately for the Americans, and eventually for South Vietnam, ignoring Australian CRW only limited the counterinsurgency's success. The TEAM was the first foreign group to serve with a U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group, and it was not long before issues arose over Australian uniforms and flags amongst their American counterparts. For the Australians, "it was essential that the contingent did not lose its identity and that it never be fully absorbed into the American advisory structure."[22] It was also immediately evident that the Americans on the ground in South Vietnam did not see the need for the Australians nor did they believe them to be of any use. A Malaya Emergency veteran, Captain Barry Petersen, who was arguably one of the best advisers sent into South Vietnam, was sent into the Central Highlands in 1963, yet his commanding officer, then Colonel B. P. Serong, had to persuade the C.I.A to allow for an Australian officer to run his own field program.[23] It was also immediately evident to Colonel Serong that American General Paul D. Harkins, then the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) Commander, did not want any Australian advisers for counterinsurgency operations, nor did he want the "representative of a third nation attached to his staff to perform any function

[21] Terry Burstall, *Vietnam: The Australian Dilemma* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1993), 49, 88, and The Australian Army, *The Division in Battle Pamphlet No.11, Counter-Revolutionary Warfare* (Army Headquarters, Canberra, Australia, 1965), 73.
[22] John Rowe, *Australians at War: Vietnam: The Australian Experience* (Sydney: Time-Life, 1987), 8.
[23] Petersen, 18.

whatsoever."[24] Above all, some Americans interpreted the Australian CRW as unsuitable for counterinsurgency operations in South Vietnam, instead arguing that "the Malaysian [sic] experience tended to support the soft approach as it was quite successful in that case."[25]

In November 1962, eight months after the first arrival of the TEAM members, Colonel F. P. Serong issued his 'Field Service Regulations,' which provided foreign advisers with a common standard of military disciple, measuring the success of counterinsurgency efforts by the "amount and quality of spontaneous information made available from the civilian population."[26] However, while the American advisers and the C.I.A were extremely resistant to the Australian advisers, the Australians were able to make significant headway with the local populations. This instance was especially true in the Central Highlands and illustrates an example of Australian success that the Americans did not capitalize on. The Americans were especially concerned with the ethnic groups residing in the Central Highlands, as these groups were vulnerable to joining forces either with the communists or causing rebellions against the Saigon government.[27] After being left behind by his C.I.A handler in the Darlac province for six weeks, Captain Barry Petersen compared the situation to being "left like a shag on a rock," as the C.I.A had simply expected him to mingle with the local Highlander population right away.[28] Regardless of the C.I.A.'s naiveté and arrogance towards the native population, Petersen was able to develop a command structure similar to the Vietnamese structure but also more suitable for the Highlanders. He handpicked and trained the first one hundred men for counter-insurgency

[24] Oral interview with Serong in Blair, 77.
[25] Lieutenant General Julian J. Ewell and Major General Ira A. Hunt, "Sharpening the Combat Edge: The Use of Analysis to Reinforce Military Judgment," in *Vietnam Studies Series* (Washington D.C.: Department of Army, 1974), 227-228 as cited in Robert A. Hall, *Combat Battalion: The Eighth Battalion in Vietnam* (Crows Nest, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2000), 43.
[26] Blair, 83-84.
[27] Often referred to as Montagnards, this paper will address these ethnic groups as Central Highlanders, or Highlanders for short, to avoid the use of perceived diminutive terms.
[28] An Australian idiom and slang term to be left completely alone or to stand out by oneself. Petersen, 25.

training and recruited the local chiefs while even bestowing them the ceremonial title of 'Commander-in-Chief,' a symbolic yet powerful gesture for the locals. These handpicked men formed the Truong Son Force, a group of anti-communist local Highlanders guided and trained by Petersen. This unit utilized National Liberation Front (NLF) tactics including hit-and-run ambush tactics, but was commanded by a local Highlander.[29] Above all, Petersen quickly realized that "I should not jeopardize my relationship with the Vietnamese by being too persistent. They had already had more than enough of this from some of the American advisors."[30] Petersen and the Warrant Officers serving under him also participated in highly intoxicating rice-wine drinking ceremonies, an extremely important Highlander tradition, arguing that "acceptance is won in many ways, and diplomacy comes in many forms—even if one's dignity is occasionally bruised in the process."[31]

The Americans avoided this tradition and many other traditions altogether, choosing to rely on their own counterinsurgency tactics. The C.I.A wanted to create counter-terror teams, which would carry out retaliations on NLF members or supporters. Petersen argued that the Truong Son Force should be called to deal with any cases where the village chief could identify a communist within his own village. He also stressed that these "assassin teams" could develop into something the C.I.A could not control. The C.I.A and its Covert Action Branch (CAB) wanted this Phoenix Program, and other programs just like it, conducted in each area in South Vietnam, regardless of the sustainability or local conditions. However, as Petersen's staggering successes and influence with the Highlanders mounted, the C.I.A agents, who were unable to

[29] Also known as the Viet Cong, this paper will address this group as the National Liberation Front, or NLF for short, as to avoid confusion with multiple phrases for this group of communists who fought in South Vietnam.
[30] Petersen, 27.
[31] Ibid.

cope with their fears that a career officer within their own ranks could not match his influence, forcibly banished him from the region in 1965.[32]

Petersen and other Australians soon understood that the Highlanders, as well the Vietnamese, were more willing to share information with sources that they trusted. They were not, however, enthusiastic about sharing information just for information's sake, as the Americans had hoped for with the Phoenix Program. More critically, TEAM members and other Australians across South Vietnam quickly realized that the Vietnamese generally did not hold their American advisers, "who were often arrogant and presumptuous, even when they newly arrived," in the highest regard.[33] As the C.I.A and the Americans believed that one counterinsurgency program could be applied and utilized everywhere in South Vietnam, Petersen and the Australians maintained that each operational concept need to be "tailored for certain areas only."[34] Ironically, American Ambassador Maxwell Taylor praised the Australians' operations in the Highlands by stating, "this is the type of operation we should be conducting throughout the whole of South Vietnam."[35]

Despite the differences between the American and Australia advisers, the Americans were still devoted to keeping the Australians in South Vietnam. As the Australians sent the 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (1 RAR) infantry battalion to South Vietnam in May 1965, which was joined with the U.S. 173rd Airborne Brigade, the Americans were already requesting another Australian combat battalion to be deployed before October 1966.[36] The Americans continued to press for support from Australia troops. By acknowledging greater Australian fears

[32] Ibid, 144-148.
[33] Ernie Chamberlain, Intelligence Officer, South Vietnam 1969-1970 as quoted in Gary McKay, *Bullets, Beans & Bandages: Australians at War in Vietnam* (Crows Nest, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 108.
[34] Petersen, 132.
[35] Ibid.
[36] U.S. State Department, "Memorandum from Secretary of Defense McNamara to President Johnson," *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968, Volume III, Vietnam, June-December 1965, 30 November 1965*, Document 212.

with Malaya, the American hoped that visits and meetings between the countries would "have the over-all purpose of presenting to the world a dramatic picture of the collective support being given to South Vietnam."[37] While the Americans acknowledged Australia's other regional fears, it is clear that the Americans were still striving to dissuade any claims that the Americans were fighting on behalf of an illegitimate government in Saigon. The dismantling of this notion became ever more important for the Americans back home with the increasingly vocal anti-war movement. Eager to "[give] some exposure to some of our Congressional people," the Americans even probed the probability of hosting Australian Prime Minister Harold Holt in Washington, D.C. in hopes of not only boosting American morale but also "bragging on the Australians."[38] As the First Australian Task Force (1 ATF) arrived in South Vietnam in 1966, the Americans acknowledged that additional commitments "will require examination by Australian and United States military staffs of such matters as command structure, operational role and deployment organization and logistics."[39]

However, for the First Australian Task Force (1 ATF) and other Australians, this commitment by the Americans never fully materialized in South Vietnam and the Australian combat and counterinsurgency efforts were therefore still subjugated to restrictions by the United States military. In April 1966, the 1 ATF was stationed in the province of Phuoc Tuy and charged with defending the region. The province was chosen because of its location near a deep water port, but was neither near the Cambodian border nor I Corps. While they wanted to contribute to the war effort, the Australians wanted to avoid these types of areas because of their

[37] U.S. State Department, " Memorandum From the President's Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson," *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968, Volume IV, Vietnam, 1966, 22 September 1966,* Document 242.
[38] U.S. State Department, "Telegram from Secretary of State Rusk to Department of State," *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968, Volume XXVII, Mainland Southeast Asia; Regional Affairs, 27 June 1966,* Document 14.
[39] U.S. State Department, "Memorandum of Conversation," *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968, Volume XXVII, Mainland Southeast Asia; Regional Affairs, 5 March 1966,* Document 11.

small numbers of men and supplies. As well, Phuoc Tuy was also seen as a province that had been progressing towards the third stage of Mao Tse-Tung's People's War: revolutionary warfare doctrine was now culminating towards conventional-style war. Establishing their base at Nui Dat, the Australians' original plan was to control the area and shorten the communists' lines of communication and supplies with the goal of restricting the enemy's effectiveness. The Australian soldiers in the 1 ATF described it as "pouring oil onto water."[40] Previously, the Australians were attached to the U.S. 173rd Airborne Brigade, but now in Phuoc Tuy, the 1 ATF was not joined to any American unit and seemingly given more leeway from the U.S. Command structure. Hoping to "establish their own little patch of territory and remain in comparative isolation from the main thrust of war," the Australians ultimately fell under the command of the new MACV Commander, U.S. General William Westmoreland, who had alternative plans for the Australians.[41]

The Australians were more patient than the Americans, better guerrilla fighters, better at ambushes. They liked to stay with us instead of calling in the planes. We were more afraid of their style.

—NLF fighter Trinh Duc[42]

The Australians were more experienced and adapted to guerilla warfare and counterinsurgency tactics than were the Americans at the onset of the war in South Vietnam. However, by sticking to their original doctrine and by not adapting to what was actually needed, the Americans soon found their counterinsurgency tactics to be highly unsuccessful. Even in late June 1971 in Phuoc Tuy, the Australians observed the Americans' lack of training and lack of adaptation as Gary McKay noted that: "I had heard the Americans were not well trained as we

[40] Buick, 19.
[41] Burstall, 60.
[42] David Chanoff, and Toai Doan Van, *'Vietnam': A Portrait of its People at War* (London: I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd., 1996), 108.

may have been, but to walk along tracks in an area where the enemy was known to be operating was just asking for trouble."[43] What amazed and frightened McKay and other Australians the most was the lack of awareness and discipline on American patrols. After running into an American platoon while on patrol, McKay details how none of the Americans had applied camouflage cream on their faces, an essential task for the Australians, and how "not one man was capable of firing in the direction his eyes were looking, and most of the remainder of the platoon were in similar—if not worse—state of readiness."[44] This lack of awareness and readiness can be attributed to the lack of American guerrilla warfare training but also to the American deployment structure. During the war, Marine tours lasted thirteen months and Army tours last twelve months. During these tours, the U.S. Army would rotate soldiers; officers also spent a year in country, but only six of those months were in a troop command. While this system was designed to replace and replenish men in units, it sometimes entailed transferring men into completely different companies and areas of combat.[45] The Australians' tour also lasted twelve months, but unless absolutely necessary, the Australians avoided transferring men between companies and avoided sending men into completely different areas. The Americans also viewed their deployment system as a way to achieve a better range of experience whereas the Australians viewed a twelve-month tour as the surest way not only to gain more experience but also to gain substantial and worthy intelligence. However, demonstrated by American platoons' lack of readiness, awareness, and adaptation by late June 1971, the American training and deployment system was neither capable nor suitable for counterinsurgency warfare.

[43] Gary McKay, *In Good Company: one man's war in Vietnam* (Sydeny: Allen & Unwin, 2000), 81.
[44] Ibid, 81.
[45] Often, the goal for American soldiers was just to survive the six months in the field. See Mark DePu, "The Vietnam War: The Individual Rotation Policy," *Vietnam War* (13 November 2006), accessed 5 May 2014, http://www.historynet.com/vietnam-war-the-individual-rotation-policy.htm. For an on-the-ground perspective, see Frederick Downs, *The Killing Zone: My Life in the Vietnam War* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007).

As an extremely powerful conventional army, the United States military sought to remain a conventional force in South Vietnam. The Australians were aghast to learn that the Americans were training the South Vietnamese to combat a massed invasion from North Vietnam across the demilitarized zone (DMZ).[46] With their Counter-Revolutionary Warfare (CRW) and Malaya Emergency experience, the Australians sought to train the South Vietnamese in counterinsurgency tactics, emphasizing patrolling and tracking the enemy. Australian Diggers were known worldwide for their expertise in patrolling, and this concept was extremely vital to the Australian CRW.[47] Individual tactics like basic weapons training and handling were heavily emphasized. The Australian advisers also highlighted hit-and-run and ambushing tactics, often mirroring the very same tactics the NLF were utilizing. Statistics illustrate the Australians' patrolling capabilities as combat data shows that the Australians engaged the enemy first in about ninety percent of contacts. In contrast, American data shows eighty-eight percent of engagements were first initiated by the NLF.[48] Australian Vietnam veteran Bob Buick also argues that the Australians' constant patrols prevented any ground attack on their base at Nui Dat compared to the Americans who had numerous attacks on their bases, including the infamous attack on Pleiku in 1965. Another example includes Captain Barry Petersen's Highlander Truong Son Force, which was so effective with hit-and-run tactics against communist forces that the NLF called them Tiger Men.[49] Australian patrols usually worked in eight-man teams and avoided having three or four platoons in the same patrol, since when "working together in small groups,

[46] Rowe, 10.
[47] Military slang for soldiers. While the origins of the term relate to the Australians' experience in the trenches during World War I, Australians today usually refer to New Zealand soldiers as Kiwis, while New Zealanders refer to Australians soldiers as Diggers. Buick, 59-60.
[48] Andrew Ross combat data as cited in Hall, 102-103.
[49] Captured documents revealed the NLF nickname for these men. See Barry Petersen, *Tiger Men: An Australian's Secret War* (South Melbourne: Macmillan Co. of Australia, 1988).

command and control problems usually do not arise."[50] As Special Air Service (SAS) soldier Terry O'Farrell described it: "without fear of contradiction I can say that whenever we tried to work in larger patrols things always went awry. It was simply a case of too many chiefs and not enough Indians."[51] As for transportation for these patrols, the Americans heavily relied upon helicopters or armored personal carriers (APCs), whereas the Australians marched to an area of operations (AO) "Malayan style: the battalion walked in the AO, silent—albeit slower—fashion, hoping to surprise the Vietcong."[52] While the Australians viewed patrols as essential to counterinsurgency, the Americans relied on other tactics for these types of missions.

The most notable and obvious difference between American and Australian combat tactics was the American reliance on firepower and artillery. Stemming from success in World War II and the Korean War, the Americans were eager to call in heavy air strikes and make concentrated attacks as a way to save manpower and lower the number of casualties. These tactics again reflected the American desire to remain a conventional force, but what Captain Barry Petersen observed as "overkill and excess."[53] Petersen was not the only Australian to agree with this description of the American use of firepower as excess. Describing a situation at a landing zone, Gary McKay described the Americans as "simply shooting up the bush to impress us or have a go at us." In contrast, McKay and the other Australians did not consider this landing zone as 'hot,' or under enemy fire.[54] The Americans' fondness for the use of firepower severely weakened their patrol operations. For example, if the Americans made contact with the NLF on patrol, they would not chase the retreating NLF but call for airstrikes instead. The NLF

[50] Terry O'Farrell, *Behind Enemy Lines: An Australian SAS Soldier in Vietnam* (St. Leonard's, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1984), 137.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Buick, 72.
[53] Petersen, 237.
[54] McKay, 78.

adapted their response accordingly so to "break contact and disappear if we could, but if we couldn't we'd move up right next to them so the planes couldn't get us."[55] These American tactics also often resulted in unintended deaths of many civilians. To avoid indiscriminate civilian casualties as well as their own casualties, the Australians sought to save lives by emphasizing the soldiers' training. The aim of the training was not only to raise the individual and small group skills to very high levels but also to give the soldiers the best chance of surviving on the battlefield while still achieving the mission.[56] Again, the NLF noticed a difference as "it seemed the enemy had learned a lot about how to fight in the jungle. The Australians were especially good."[57] This focus on individual training and completion of the mission also stemmed from the small numbers in the Australian patrols as well as the small number of supplies. While the Americans had what seemed like unlimited supplies and personnel, the Australians chose to conserve lives in another way.

No matter the small numbers of men and supplies, local relations with the Vietnamese improved greatly for the Australians because of their patrol tactics, and much of this success is credited to the Australian CRW. American combat troops would often leave an area after the enemy had been cleared as illustrated by the Battle of Ia Drang in late 1965. In comparison to American tactics, the Australian CRW saw "little value in operations that cleared the enemy from the area only to abandon those areas later."[58] Australian patrols would instead clear an enemy from a selected area, establish control over the population, and secure stable relations with the leaders. Fortifying these relations entailed having tea with local villagers to demonstrate that "we were performing our duties as soldiers and that they could see we were not

[55] NLF fighter Trinh Duc as quoted in David Chanoff, and Toai Doan Van, *'Vietnam': A Portrait of its People at War* (London: I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd., 1996), 108.
[56] Hall, 103.
[57] NLF fighter Trinh Duc as quoted in Chanoff and Doan Van, 107.
[58] Hall, 27.

ogres."[59] In some cases, but only when deemed necessary, the Australians would burn down the house of a communist sympathizer, citing it as an effective method of eliminating the enemy's means of support and supplies. Political implications quickly heightened as in many instances, the Australians realized that several families were divided: one son might be fighting for the communists while another was fighting for the ARVN. For this reason, Colonel F. P. Serong was aghast to learn of the proposed "hatred campaign" against the communists that was being promoted by the United States Information Service (USIS) in 1964.[60] Regardless, until this process of pacification was complete, the Australians did not use this tactic in adjoining hamlets and villages. The Australians also viewed the American Strategic Hamlet Program as flawed and inept. Brigadier Serong described the hamlet program as an unintentional trap: "the distribution of population is mostly along traffic arteries, canals, roads, and railways. The authorities were able to bring the people along the arteries under their security umbrella, but the areas between the arteries were not covered."[61] For this reason, and unlike the Americans, Australian patrols sought to avoid this trap.

The grand strategy for the Americans always strove for conventional battles. The use of firepower, lack of jungle warfare training, little use of patrols, and reliance on hamlets all indicate this strategy. However, in the province of Phuoc Tuy, the Australians demonstrated that their Counter-Revolutionary Warfare (CRW) drove the NLF to seek a conventional battle. Arriving in 1966, the Australians and their CRW drove the NLF further away from settled areas, and by August 1966, the NLF launched an attack five kilometers away from the Nui Dat Australian base in what was the first engagement in the Battle of Long Tan. In a torrential

[59] Petersen, 105.
[60] AWM 95, 13 Mach 1964 entry as quoted in Blair, 86.
[61] Brigadier F.P. Serong, "Counter-insurgency" (lecture, SEATO Headquarters, Bangkok, Thailand, 1 January 1969).

downpour, 108 Australians defended and countered the 2500 attacking NLF in three hours. It was a remarkable Australian victory with only eighteen Australians dead compared to 245 NLF.[62] The battle was neither a political nor military achievement for the NLF, as nothing was captured or gained. More importantly, the Australians enjoyed full control over the region after 18 August 1966, as the NLF were never able to return to full operational status in the area. Australian Bob Buick remembers the battle since "a lot of the locals appeared to be friendlier towards us after Long Tan."[63] Buick also asserts that if the CRW continued as originally planned, Phuoc Tuy "could have been the only province totally under government control by 1969-1970."[64] Although Australian operations in Phuoc Tuy were to be given more leeway than ever before, American General Westmoreland implemented his own plan in the area, as ultimately the Australians' 1 ATF fell under operational control of the U.S. Army's Commanding General II Field Force Vietnam (II FFV). The Australians did not want to create tension within the high command, and because of their contribution size, they had little choice but to accept Westmoreland's direction. Favoring "maneuver battalions" to intercept and destroy NLF main force units, the American efforts inevitably forced the removal of almost ten percent of the province population.[65] By the end of 1969, the Australians were alienated from the population and thus, little progress was made militarily or politically.[66] The difference here is clear: the Australian CRW was able to draw out the main force units of the NLF as the communists became more desperate to maintain control over the area. By focusing on a war of attrition and by seeking conventional battle, Westmoreland and the Americans slowly alienated

[62] Rex Sadler, and Tom Hayllar, *In the Line of Fire: Real Stories of Australians at War, from Gallipoli to Vietnam* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 2005), chap. Vietnam War.
[63] Buick, 221.
[64] Ibid, 224.
[65] Typically entails infantry or tank battalions, anywhere from three to six companies. American maneuver battalions relied heavily on arterially usage. This usage accounts for the population decrease in the area as the population sought safety.
[66] Burstall, 68, 118.

the population. Worse, the American military allowed the NLF the "option of choosing to fight, or not, as they saw fit."[67]

Ultimately, the Australian CRW was not successful in Phuoc Tuy after 1966 for three reasons. First, the Australians needed more men. Specifically, the 1st Australian Task Force (1 ATF) needed at least one additional battalion to continue the counterinsurgency efforts at the rate needed. Terry Burstall asserts that the Task Force's chances for success were severely restricted even from the very beginning and questions why the Australian government did not originally send in another battalion. Tying in with this political decision, the second factor was that, like the Americans, the Australian home-front lost interest in the war largely due to the rising number of mine and booby trap casualties. These occurrences only spearheaded the Australian withdrawal by 1972, as the Australians publicly indicated two years after the Battle of Long Tan that there would be no more Australian forces sent into South Vietnam.[68] Third, the most significant reason why the CRW failed in Phuoc Tuy, was that the American command hindered many of the Australian efforts and successes. Seeking to eradicate communist forces via conventional ways, Westmoreland continued to reel in the Australian counterinsurgency efforts, instead insisting that the Australians conform to the American way of war. Unfortunately for the Australians, there was little their command could do to protest the American management style as they lacked any higher influence within the American military to shape strategy. As Australian Vietnam veteran Robert A. Hall noted, "good tactics cannot compensate for poor strategy."[69]

The Australians sent to South Vietnam were better prepared for counter-revolutionary warfare than were their American counterparts. The Malaya Emergency taught the Australians

[67] Hall, 30.
[68] U.S. State Department, "Memorandum From the President's Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume XXVII, Mainland South East Asia; Regional Affairs, 25 May 1968*, Document 37.
[69] Hall, 259.

counterinsurgency tactics and helped them develop their Counter-Revolutionary Warfare doctrine (CRW). Despite this knowledge, the Australians strongly believed that CRW tactics could not be uniformly applied to an entire area, region, or even country; rather, these tactics needed to be assessed and employed where they were best suited. Ultimately, the main difference between the Americans and Australians was that the Australians saw this war as a "political war," not a "military war." Australian counterinsurgency expert Brigadier F. P. Serong argued that there "must be a good economic basis to attain political satisfaction in the country; once there is political satisfaction in South Vietnam there is no way in which the Communists will be able to re-establish themselves short of force."[70] In contrast, the Americans viewed the entire region of South Vietnam as a conventional war waiting to happen and thus continued to try fighting the communists in this manner. Any attempts or successes made by the Australians in their counterinsurgency efforts were merely shrugged off or in Captain Barry Petersen's case, ignored all together. Instead, the Americans viewed the Australians as means to legitimize both the Saigon government and the American efforts in South Vietnam. Reflected in government documents, this premise originated with the Australian economic and military aid to Saigon, and continued with deployment of the advisers and the arrival of the Task Force. The Australians were simply a pawn in the American's political arena while the Americans sought to maintain control of the entire military operation.

Ironically, even after everything the Australians had done for the United States, the Americans did not hold the Australians in the highest regard shortly after the Australian withdrawal in 1972: "Incidentally, the President wants the State Department to know that our relations with Australia have not improved, despite stories to the contrary that have been

[70] Brigadier F.P. Serong, "Counter-insurgency" (lecture, SEATO Headquarters, Bangkok, Thailand, 1 January 1969).

circulating. [Australian Prime Minister] Whitlam is not being invited, and if he comes anyway you can be sure that he will not be received."[71] Unfortunately for the population in South Vietnam, the Australians' counterinsurgency tactics did not adhere to the American grand strategy for the war. The Australian CRW was not the be-all-to-end -all in counterinsurgency tactics nor was it the perfect solution for the situation in South Vietnam. However, one has to wonder whether the outcome in Vietnam would have been different if the Americans had adapted any part of the Australian counter-insurgency doctrine.

[71] The South Vietnamese government invited state officials to Long Binh, the new headquarters for their administration, during an early 1973 ceasefire. Henry Kissinger was to attend this meeting, representing the American State Department. American diplomat U. Alexis Johnson asked, "Can you tell me why we are so tough on the Australians and not on the French? I think [French President Georges] Pompidou's behavior has been outrageous." U.S. State Department, "Minutes of a Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, Washington D.C.," *Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976, Volume IX, Vietnam October 1972-January 1973, 24 January 1973*, Document 334.

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