The decision to send an Australian infantry battalion to Vietnam is a grave one; these are inescapable obligations which fall on us because of our position, treaties and friendship. There was no alternative but to respond as we have.

A quotation on the Australian Vietnam Forces National Memorial

**FOCUS QUESTIONS:**

- What was the Vietnam War?
- Why did Australia become involved?
- Was this a popular decision?
- What was the nature of the Australian involvement?

*Garden Island, Sydney, NSW, 27 March 1968. Troops of the 1st Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR), board the troop carrier HMAS Sydney prior to their departure for Vietnam.

AWM CUN/68/0129/EC*
Australia became deeply involved in the Vietnam War in 1965. On 29 April, Prime Minister Robert Menzies announced to Parliament that Australia would send combat troops to South Vietnam. Since 1962 Australia’s involvement was a small number of Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV) advisers sent to train South Vietnamese troops and a Royal Australian Air Force Transport Flight from 1964, but this was to be a substantial increase in our military commitment.

For 2000 years Vietnam has alternated between being part of a Chinese state (111BC–932AD), a unified and independent state (932–1545, 1788–1847 and 1975 until today), a foreign colony (1843–1954), and a divided state (1545–1788 and 1954–1975). China was an ever-present factor on its northern border; during the 19th century France had invaded the area and created French Indo-China — comprising Cochin, Annam and Tonkin (modern Vietnam), and what are now Cambodia and Laos — and in 1940 Japan invaded and seized control from the French.

When the Japanese surrendered in 1945, the French returned. In the north, the Vietnamese nationalists, the Viet Minh, led by the communist Ho Chi Minh, fought against them for Vietnamese independence; in the south, British support, which did not last long, for the French made them more secure, though there were southern Viet Minh who continued to seek an independent Vietnam.

In 1954, the Viet Minh defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu in northern Vietnam, declared the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV or North Vietnam), and claimed that they were the legitimate government of all Vietnam. They did not control what soon became the Republic of Vietnam (RVN — South Vietnam), but supported local Viet Minh activity to destabilise the south.

A conference of the major world powers in Geneva in 1954 finally suggested a temporary division of Vietnam at the 17th parallel of latitude, with a vote of all Vietnamese to be held in July 1956 to decide on unification. The French signed an agreement for South Vietnam, but neither the United States of America (USA) nor the Vietnamese Emperor in South Vietnam, Bao Dai, committed themselves to it. The French now left South Vietnam, and Ngo Dinh Diem became President.

Many Viet Minh nationalists in the south continued to undermine the new South Vietnam Government and worked towards allowing the country to be unified under Ho Chi Minh. No vote on unification was ever held. The Americans increasingly became involved in supporting the South Vietnamese government, believing that if South Vietnam became communist, other neighbouring countries — Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Malaya — would also fall. This was the ‘domino’ theory.

The Australian Government always presented the Vietnam War as one of a Chinese-supported communist invasion of the south by a dictatorial north, while those who opposed the war presented it as a nationalist and anti-colonial movement and a civil war that foreign powers ought not be involved in. This was also consistent with Australia’s role in the ‘Cold War’, as a defender of the democratic and capitalist countries, led by the United States of America, against those that were communist and socialist dominated, led by the USSR (Russia) and China.

By the end of 1964 the United States (US) had provided massive financial and other aid to Vietnam, and had 16,000 military advisers training South Vietnamese troops. It seemed to be doing it all alone and called for ‘more flags’ to be seen in Vietnam. The US now looked to Australia and other countries for support and wanted 200 more Australian military advisers in Vietnam. What would Australia do?

Australia was unable to provide more advisors because of the expansion of the Australian Army with the introduction of conscription. When Australia responded on 29 April 1965 it was to send an infantry battalion to join American combat battalions that had already arrived in Vietnam.

The Australian decision to become involved, and to extend that involvement, was influenced by four major factors.

The first was an anti-communist and pro-democracy ideology. The potentially democratic South Vietnam seemed to be under attack from communism, with its political, economic and social implications.
There was also a fear of regional developments. China had become communist in 1949, Australia believed that Indonesia was likely to head that way, and there were strong communist movements in Laos, Malaysia and Thailand.

In 1964 Australia was in fact fighting Indonesians in the Malayan peninsula and Borneo during the Indonesian confrontation. In 1963, the United Nations which was administering the Dutch West New Guinea handed control to Indonesia. It looked like there could be a communist power on the borders of the Australian Territories of Papua and New Guinea.

The fourth element was the Australian Government’s belief that it needed to tie itself to the United States for its security in the region. Australia had ‘looked to America’ during World War II, and had served alongside it in the Korean War as part of a British Commonwealth force within the United Nations body of troops. It was also a member of two regional defence pacts: ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand and United States) and SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation). But the United States did not share Australia’s belief that Indonesia might fall to communism and was therefore not willing to provide it with a security commitment.

Australian diplomats advised that the government could win favour with the United States by providing troops to the US commitment in Vietnam. By doing so it was hoped that we would demonstrate our reliability to the United States, and it would be more likely to help us against any regional threat. Australia now offered a combat battalion to the Americans and sought the assent of the South Vietnamese Government before making an announcement.

The circumstances in which the South Vietnamese Government requested the Australian battalion later became controversial. While the Australian Government was providing support for the United States, it was unwilling to make the commitment without an official request from the South Vietnamese Government. South Vietnam did not initiate the request but it explicitly approved the terms of the Australian announcement and gave its assent.

The decision was generally well-received and accepted in the community, with only one major newspaper, The Australian, opposing it from the start.

The AATTV continued to operate, generally in one- or two-man teams in a variety of places in South Vietnam, while the new combat troops — the 1st Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR), together with some logistical support elements — was sent to the province of Bien Hoa, just north of Saigon, to be part of the United States’ 173rd Independent Airborne Brigade.

Later forces (including increased infantry numbers as well as logistical support, RAAF helicopter, transport and bomber crews and maintenance support) would be mainly located in Phuoc Tuy Province and be able to operate independently rather than as part of an American formation. Supply was partly from the Royal Australian Navy vessels HMAS Jeparit and HMAS Sydney, and partly from the American supply base at Long Binh in Bien Hoa province. This autonomy suited the Australians, as they did not agree with the American tactical approach of using massive firepower to draw the enemy into high-casualty firefights. The Australians instead implemented the counter-guerrilla warfare they had learned fighting Communist insurgents in the jungles of Malaya, where the emphasis was on small, silent patrols to ambush the enemy and deny it access to the villages where it received its food, money, intelligence and recruits.

This emphasis on counter-terrorist warfare was to be the characteristic of most Australian Army contact with the enemy for the rest of the Australian involvement in the war.

Between 1962 and 1975 nearly 60,000 Australian troops and some civilian elements served in Vietnam. Most units were sent for twelve-month tours. At its height there were about 8000 Australian combat and logistical support troops in Vietnam at the one time.

The last unit to leave was the one that had been the first to arrive — the AATTV. The last Australian military commitment was a RAAF Hercules transport plane detachment that flew humanitarian missions, such as the evacuation of war orphans, into and out of South Vietnam as the war was drawing to an end.
Key learning outcomes

By the end of this topic students will be better able to:
- Consider their attitude to involvement in war
- Locate Vietnam on a map and describe its basic geography and history
- Understand the ‘domino theory’
- Consider a variety of reasons for Australian involvement in the war
- Understand the attitude of supporters and opponents of involvement at the time
- Decide if the Government was honest in its account of why it participated in the war
- Understand the nature of Australia’s military commitment to the war

Some suggested classroom strategies

ACTIVITY 1
This is a way of introducing students to a key concept in a content-neutral way, and with students being able to draw on their own knowledge of the modern world. Small-class discussion can be followed by general discussion. Alternatively, students could be told that they are the Australian electorate and have to vote in each case on whether to involve the nation. In this way they are simulating a national rather than a personal approach.

ACTIVITY 2
Small groups should work through the questions to gather basic information and understanding. At the end, direct the students back to the hypothetical situations in Activity 1 — they will now start to make specifically historical connections.

ACTIVITY 3
This is a shorthand way of covering a lot of material. If required, some students can be asked to look at the longer extracts and to report back to class. A key concept to discuss here is: Who makes a decision on war in a democracy? Should the people have a say on it? Or is that impracticable, or undesirable, or both?

ACTIVITY 4
This activity raises another significant concept: What is the public’s right to be given information on major public policy issues?

ACTIVITY 5
This allows students to start thinking about the varied nature of Australia’s military involvement. They can set up hypotheses that they will test in following topics. The activity can be undertaken in small groups or pairs, with each reporting back to the class on their ideas.

Interactive CD-ROM and DVD resources

On the Australia and the Vietnam War CD-ROM students can:
- Browse the Interactive Maps (Primary and Secondary)
- Browse the Interactive Timeline (Primary and Secondary)

Some discussion of the reasons for involvement in the war is on the DVD containing Episode 7 (The Vietnam War) from the Australians at War documentary series.
Imagine the following situations. Decide if you would support Australia going to war in each of these situations involving country X. Record your reason/s in the appropriate column. You will be asked to come back to look again at your responses later.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Australia go to war?</th>
<th>Reasons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(A) Australia has been attacked by country X.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(B) Country X is threatening to attack Australia.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(C) Country X is building up its weapons and might attack Australia in the future.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(D) Country X is likely to be an enemy in the future so Australia should attack it first.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(E) An ally of Australia in the region has been attacked by country X.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(F) An ally of Australia in another part of the world has been attacked by country X.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(G) Australia attacks country X to replace a brutal dictator with a democratic system of government.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(H) Australia supports one side in a civil war in country X.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(I) Australia attacks country X because our biggest ally does and we want to make sure they stay bound to us if we need them to help us in the future.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(J) Under no circumstances would you support Australia going to war against country X.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Why was Australia involved in the Vietnam War?

Between 1962 and 1972 Australia was part of the war in Vietnam between the South Vietnamese Government and the North Vietnamese Government.

1. Use an atlas or go to the CD-ROM map activity to identify Vietnam on this map.
2. How far is it from the nearest part of Australia?
3. Suggest reasons why Australia might be involved in a war in Vietnam.

The war in Vietnam has to be seen in a ‘Cold War’ context. The Cold War was a period from 1945 to 1991 of ideological conflict between capitalism/democracy and communism — involving mainly the United States of America and its allies, and the Soviet Union and its allies. Competition between these blocs for influence and power threatened to break out into ‘hot war’, with the fear that atomic missiles would be fired. There were many small or localised conflicts, but none actually drew the large powers into full-scale war.

Here are some events from the time that affected the conflict in Vietnam.

**SOURCE 1 Timeline of some Cold War events in the Asian region**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>Japanese surrender, ending World War II.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>Communist guerrillas seek to take control of Malaya from the British.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>Australia supports Indonesian independence from the Dutch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>China becomes a communist country.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950–1966</td>
<td>Australia provides military support to Malaya (later Malaysia).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950–1953</td>
<td>Korean War, United Nations troops (mainly from the United States of America and Australia) and North Korean and Chinese forces involved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>ANZUS defence alliance formed — Australia, New Zealand and the United States.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>Ho Chi Minh’s communist and nationalist Viet Minh defeat the French who control Vietnam, and declare Vietnam as independent. They only control the northern half of Vietnam and seek to overthrow the government of South Vietnam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) formed — Australia, France, Great Britain, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, and the United States.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959–1961</td>
<td>Communist rebels seek to take control of Laos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Australia introduces a limited form of conscription.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Indonesian troops mount a limited offensive in Borneo to destabilise Malaysia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>Australia sends troops to fight the Indonesians in Borneo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>Indonesian Government bans the Communist Party and thousands are murdered.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Look at this cartoon published in a popular Australian magazine.

7 What is the ‘red claw’?
8 Where is it coming from?
9 Where is it going?
10 What is it doing?
11 How does the cartoonist want the reader to react to this image?
12 What is the message of this cartoon?
13 How might such a cartoon be useful evidence to help us understand people’s attitudes and ideas at the time?
14 What might be the weaknesses or limitations of using such evidence to find out these things?

SOURCE 2 The Red Menace

SOURCE 3 Statement from Australian political leader Richard Casey in 1951

If Indo-China and Burma were lost to the Communists — indeed if either of them was lost — Thailand would be immediately outflanked and it would be difficult if not impossible for Thailand successfully to resist heavy Communist pressure unless very substantial help were afforded it from without. If Thailand were lost to the Communists, the large export surplus of Siamese rice which is important for Malaya and many of the countries would cease to be available. In other words, the internal position in Malaya could deteriorate substantially even before any question of direct military aggression against Malaya from the north arose … If South-East Asia and Malaya fell to the Communists, the position in Indonesia would become much less secure and inevitably the security of Australia itself would be directly imperilled.


15 This statement describes the ‘domino theory’. What does ‘domino theory’ mean?
16 Not all Australians accepted this ‘domino theory’. What might be the limitations or weaknesses in it?
17 Look back at your answer to Question 3 above. Would you add or change anything?

In 1962 Australia sent a small number of Australian Army Training Team (AATTV) advisers to train South Vietnamese troops. In 1964 a RAAF Transport Flight was sent to Vietnam. In 1965 the Government decided to increase this commitment greatly by sending a battalion (about 800 men) of combat troops. Here are parts of the Prime Minister’s 1965 announcement of the reasons for committing combat forces to Vietnam, and the response of the Opposition Australian Labor Party to it.
Prime Minister Robert Menzies:
The Australian Government is now in receipt of a request from the Government of South Viet Nam for further military assistance. We have decided and this has been after close consultation with the Government of the United States — to provide an infantry battalion for service in South Viet Nam.

There can be no doubt of the gravity of the situation in South Viet Nam. There is ample evidence to show that with the support of the North Vietnamese regime and other Communist powers, the Viet Cong has been preparing on a more substantial scale than ... [before] insurgency action designed to destroy South Vietnamese Government control, and to disrupt by violence the life of the local people.

We have not of course come to this decision without the closest attention to the question of defence priorities. We do not and must not overlook the point that our alliances, as well as providing guarantees and assurances for our security, make demands upon us. We have commitments to bear in mind, and [preparations to make against] ... the possibility of other developments in the region which could make demands on our Australian defence capacity.

Assessing all this, it is our judgment that the decision to commit a battalion in South Viet Nam represents the most useful additional contribution which we can make to the defence of the region at this time. The takeover of South Viet Nam would be a direct military threat to Australia and all the countries of South and South-East Asia. It must be seen as part of a thrust by Communist China between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, House of Representatives, 29 April 1965, vol. 45, pages 1060–1

Opposition Leader Arthur Calwell:
[O]n behalf of all my colleagues of Her Majesty’s Opposition, I say that we oppose the Government’s decision to send 800 men to fight in Vietnam. We oppose it firmly and completely ...

We do not think it will help the fight against Communism. On the contrary, we believe it will harm that fight in the long term. We do not believe it will promote the welfare of the people of Vietnam. On the contrary, we believe it will prolong and deepen the suffering of that unhappy people so that Australia’s very name may become a term of reproach among them. We do not believe that it represents a wise or even intelligent response to the challenge of Chinese power ... We of the Labour Party do not believe that this decision serves, or is consistent with, the immediate strategic interests of Australia. On the contrary, we believe that, by sending one quarter of our pitifully small effective military strength to distant Vietnam, this Government dangerously denudes Australia and its immediate strategic environs of effective defence power. Thus, for all these and other reasons, we believe we have no choice but to oppose this decision in the name of Australia and of Australia’s security.

I propose to show that the Government’s decision rests on three false assumptions: An erroneous view of the nature of the war in Vietnam; a failure to understand the nature of the Communist challenge; and a false notion as to the interests of America and her allies. No debate on the Government’s decision can proceed, or even begin, unless we make an attempt to understand the nature of the war in Vietnam. Indeed, this is the crux of the matter; for unless we understand the nature of the war, we cannot understand what Australia’s correct role in it should be.

People are not usually given the chance to decide if they want their country to go to war. But we can find out if they supported that decision or not.

The ways usually used by historians to try to find out include looking at how public opinion is expressed — in newspapers, public opinion polls and elections.

**SOURCE 1** *Editorial reactions to the announcement of Australia’s involvement in the Vietnam War*

1. Look at these reactions from the major newspapers about Australia’s commitment of combat troops to the Vietnam War. Place a ✓ on those that seem to be supporting the decision, a ✘ beside those that seem to be opposing it, and a ? where you cannot tell.

2. What is your conclusion from this evidence about Australians’ likely attitude to involvement in the war?

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Here is some more evidence.

**SOURCE 2** A cartoon comment on churches and war

3. What difficulties does the cartoonist say that churches have with war?

4. Do you think people’s religious beliefs or church membership would be an influential element in their decision whether to support war or not? Explain your reasons.

**SOURCE 3** Public opinion poll closest to the date of the commitment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poll date</th>
<th>Continue to fight in Vietnam (%)</th>
<th>Bring forces back now (%)</th>
<th>Undecided (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 1965</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE 4** Federal election results before and after the commitment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>House of Representatives</th>
<th>Senate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>1966</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal*</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country Party*</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALP</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DLP*</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* denotes parties supporting involvement in the war


5. Do these sources support or challenge your answer to Question 2? Explain why.
There has been debate about whether Prime Minister Menzies told the truth in his speech to Parliament. You can be a historian and decide for yourself on this controversial issue.

The Prime Minister said in the speech quoted in Activity 2: ‘The Australian Government is now in receipt of a request from the Government of South Viet Nam for further military assistance. We have decided — and this has been after close consultation with the Government of the United States — to provide an infantry battalion for service in South Viet Nam.’

1 According to this speech, who requested the troops?
2 Who agreed to send the troops?
3 What was the role of the United States?

Is this true? Historian Michael Sexton says that the following events happened in this order:

A The Australian Government wanted to offer troops to help the United States. It decided it would offer a battalion (about 800 men plus 100 others for logistical support).
B The US finally agreed, but required that the request come from the Government of South Vietnam.
C The Australian Government did not want to make the announcement until it had received this request from the Government of South Vietnam.
D Reporter Alan Reid of The Daily Telegraph learned about the decision and published it.
E Prime Minister Menzies now had to announce the decision, but he had not yet received a request from the South Vietnamese Government for the troops.
F Australia’s Ambassador in Saigon sent a message saying that the Vietnamese Government would make a statement that ‘said in effect: At request of Vietnamese Government Australian Government has decided to send Battalion’.
G Prime Minister Menzies made his announcement as quoted above.
H Two hours after Menzies’ announcement the South Vietnamese Government issued this statement: ‘Upon the request of the Government of the Republic of Vietnam, the Government of Australia today approved the despatch to Vietnam of an Infantry Battalion together with logistical support to assist the Republic of Vietnam Armed forces in its struggle against armed aggression.’
I Later that night Prime Minister Quot wrote to Ambassador Anderson: ‘I have the honor to refer to your letter … confirming the Australian Government’s offer to send to Vietnam an infantry battalion … in assisting the defence of the Republic of Vietnam. I wish to confirm my government’s acceptance of this offer …’

Based on Michael Sexton, War For The Asking, New Holland, Sydney, 2002, passim

4 Do you think the Prime Minister lied to or misled the Australian people? If so, was it justified? If not, do you think it would ever be justified? Explain your reasons.

Your Conclusion
5 Why do you think Australia went to war in Vietnam?
6 Was this involvement justified?
Imagine that you heard a newsflash today that Australia was about to send a military force to a country that was being invaded.

1. What is your immediate image of who we would send and what they would do once they were in this country?

Your answer probably stressed the combat element — people who would do the fighting. But there is more to a military force than fighting. Look at the set of images on the next pages showing aspects of Australians’ military involvement in the Vietnam War.

2. Mark each image with the following letters where they apply: — those that show:
   - Combat troops
   - Support troops
   - Army personnel
   - Navy personnel
   - Air Force personnel
   - Civilians
   - C
   - S
   - A
   - RAN
   - RAAF
   - CIV

3. Look at your ‘codes’ for the photographs, and list the combat troops in the left hand column of this table. Then write beside each the sort of support that might be needed — for example, beside infantry soldier you might list ‘ammunition’, ‘replacement clothes’ ‘transport to the front’, and so on.

4. Write a short statement (or hypothesis) about what you now expect to discover about the nature and role of the Australian military experience in Vietnam. You will be able to test this as you work through the material in the following Topics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Combat element</th>
<th>Support element required</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Members of an Australian civilian volunteer surgical team
AWM P03122.003

A lookout on HMAS Hobart in the battle zone
AWM P03864.001

A door gunner of a No 9 Squadron RAAF Iroquois helicopter
AWM VN/66/0047/16

Gunnery from 103 Field Battery, Royal Australian Artillery
AWM EKN/66/0085/VN
Clerks sort mail at Nui Dat
AWM FAI/7/0828/VN

A welder in a workshop at Nui Dat
AWM PO0510.016

On patrol
AWM WAR/7/0657/VN

De-mining engineers
AWM EKT/7/0095/VN
Helping in villages
AWM 314472

An Australian Army nurse at Vung Tau hospital
AWM CRO/67/1227/VN

An Army cook preparing a meal for troops
AWM SHA/55/0270/VN

A clerk at Nui Dat
AWM COM/69/0073/VN
Tanks and armoured personnel carriers supporting troops in the field
AWM BEL/69/0389/VN

A Red Cross worker with wounded soldiers at 8 Field Hospital, Vung Tau
AWM P02017.016

The Salvation Army ready with hot tea for the troops
AWM GIL/67/0598/VN

You can learn more about life for the Australians in Vietnam when you:
- Dress a Paper Doll
- Prepare for Patrol
- Explore the Camp at Nui Dat

Storemen keeping fit during a break from work
AWM ERR/68/1033/VN