Life In Vietnam

From 1965 army units in Vietnam consisted of about 50% national servicemen and 50% regular army. About 20,000 national servicemen served in Vietnam.

A quotation on the Australian Vietnam Forces National Memorial

What was life like for the Vietnamese?
Who were the Allies?
Who were the enemy?
What was life like for the Australian soldiers in Vietnam?

South Vietnamese civilians driving bullock carts loaded with firewood pass an Australian armoured personnel carrier (APC) escorting troops of the 1st Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR), during Operation Abilene, 35 miles from Saigon, March–April 1966.

AWM CUN/66/0299/VN
Between 1962 and 1972 nearly 60 000 Australian men and women served in Vietnam. For many of the Australians, this was their first experience of Asia. They went into a place where the geography, economy, society, politics and social conditions of the country were all very different to what they knew at home.

The majority of Australian servicemen and women served in Phuoc Tuy province, south-east of Saigon, and sometimes assisted in neighbouring provinces. The Australians were given this province to control because it allowed good access by air and sea, and so could be reinforced or evacuated easily if necessary.

Most of the southern part of the province was swamp; much of the remaining area was jungle. There were a number of abandoned rubber plantations and some agricultural and fishing villages. The capital was Ba Ria, and there were few large towns.

After the move of 1 RAR from Bien Hoa province, north-east of Saigon, the Australian Task Force (1ATF) was established at Nui Dat in 1966. The 1st Australian Logistical Support Group (1ALSG) was set up at the same time at the port of Vung Tau, about 30 kilometres south of Nui Dat. The bases had to be created from nothing, and over time the conditions improved from canvas cities to largely well-established and permanent buildings, although the soldiers at Nui Dat always lived in tents.

Australia’s commitment was not only soldiers. The main Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) base was at Vung Tau, though there were helicopters kept at Nui Dat. There was also a bomber squadron based in Phan Rang, to the north. The RAAF role included logistical services — carrying equipment, supplies and service people to and from Vietnam and carrying casualties. The airline Qantas also provided a service between Australia and Saigon. Royal Australian Navy ships docked briefly in port at Vung Tau to load and unload troops and equipment. Some Australian warships took turns in patrolling with the American fleet in the South China Sea.

Support personnel at Nui Dat carried out a variety of jobs — such as repairing machinery, ordering food and equipment, transporting it, preparing meals, maintaining hygiene services. These men kept the combat troops functioning efficiently and effectively. The combat troops also lived in camp when they were not on patrol. Life in camp involved a variety of activities for them. There was essential personal equipment to clean and maintain. There might be brief training courses. There would be occasional guard duty or patrols around the wire perimeter. To relax soldiers might play sport. Occasionally there would be a concert provided by entertainers from Australia or locally. At night the focus might be on the local ‘boozers’, where soldiers would drink and talk, or play darts. For most of the infantry at Nui Dat these were only occasional ‘pleasures’ as they tended to be out on operations for 4-6 week periods, followed by a few days back in camp.
The Vietnamese people

A highlight of the breaks would be a two or three day stay at 1ALSG, with its easy access to the town of Vung Tau. As they passed through local towns and villages on the way to Vung Tau, or on patrols, they saw the very different way of life of the typical Vietnamese. In towns the conditions seemed crowded and, to the soldiers, quite unsanitary. All food was sold in the local market, and there was no refrigeration to protect meat and other perishables. Most soldiers did not speak more than a few words of Vietnamese and the high-pitched tonal sounds of the Vietnamese language sounded alien to the young Australian men. The people were mostly women, old men and children, with most military-eligible aged men off fighting in the South Vietnamese Army, or for the Viet Cong. There were few lasting personal contacts with the local people — this meant that there were no close bonds developed that might have given Australians greater insight into the Vietnamese people and way of life, but also reduced the inevitable friction that arises between foreign troops and locals when they are in close contact. While the purpose of the Australian force in Vietnam was ill-defined by the politicians, for most Australian servicemen and women their task was clear — to help these people live better and more secure lives.

Life at Vung Tau

When the fighting soldiers from Nui Dat arrived for their Rest and Convalescence break (R&C) at Vung Tau they could make full use of the Peter Badcoe Centre, with its swimming pool, and access to all beach activities, including surfing, sailing and water skiing. From there, the soldiers could go into town.

Life for service personnel at Vung Tau was very different from that at Nui Dat, both in the way they lived and in contact with the local people. The base was in a secure area and there were few threats from the enemy. They had free access to the town and were not confined to the camp itself when they were off duty. Soldiers in 1ALSG had different tasks — they did not fight, but supported the fighting troops as clerks, storemen, mechanics, engineers. They provided food and equipment to the soldiers up the road at Nui Dat. They ran the main hospital, maintained communications equipment and patrolled the town of Vung Tau to help the local police maintain order. They did all that was needed to keep a small town running efficiently.

Contacts between Vietnamese and Australians

Australians had more contact with local people in Vung Tau than at Nui Dat. Many local people worked in the camp, as cleaners and office assistants. There was also greater direct contact in the town itself. Life in the port city of Vung Tau was quite different to that in the villages in one major way — the presence of bars. Soldiers of many nationalities — mainly Australian, New Zealand and American, but also some South Vietnamese, Koreans and Thais — could frequent the many bars in the town. The soldiers were looking for food, entertainment, and relaxation. This tended to bring both groups into contact with the worst sides of each — the local people seeking to exploit the soldiers, and the soldiers often behaving in an undisciplined and ‘ocker’ way. Australians rarely met with typical Vietnamese families, and Vietnamese families rarely shared time with Australians other than those seeking relief and relaxation between the periods of continuous stress and tension that the fighting soldiers faced.

The enemy

All this activity and organisation, with its good and bad impacts on the local people, had been created for one purpose — to fight the enemy. The enemy was usually referred to as ‘VC’, but its organisation was more complex than this single name suggests. There were four main enemy elements:

- **Local guerrillas**, who were often not well trained or well equipped. The guerrilla was the standard part-time communist soldier: a farmer by day, a soldier by night. He or she operated in an area around the home village, on such tasks as sabotage, terrorism, intelligence gathering and the guidance of provincial and regular forces who passed through the area.

- **Provincial Viet Cong (VC) troops**. The soldiers of this unit lay between the guerrilla and the regular soldier, but were well trained, equipped and armed.

- **Main Force VC units** were trained local fighters who lived in bases away from their local villages. These units were extremely well equipped and armed, often with the latest Chinese range of weapons, and operated in company or battalion groups in and out of the Province.

- **North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops**, usually well equipped, very experienced and capable soldiers.

In 1966 when the Australians first arrived at Nui Dat, the estimated enemy strength in the province was about 5000 men and women; it was down to about 1400 by the time the Australians withdrew in 1972.
2 Key learning outcomes

By the end of this topic students will be better able to:

- Understand the geography and basic history of Vietnam
- Know which countries were involved in the war
- Understand the nature of the Australian military commitment to Vietnam
- Empathise with the life of Australian troops in camp

3 Suggested classroom approaches

**ACTIVITY 1**
To understand the nature of the soldiers’ experience and to develop empathy with them, it is necessary to realise how large a cultural shock Vietnam was for most soldiers.

**ACTIVITY 2**
This brief outline will help students be more aware of the two elements at work in the war: the external invasion element (North Vietnamese forces) and the internal local opposition (from southern supporters and sympathisers).

**ACTIVITY 3**
This is a simple way of making sure that a potentially blinkered view of the war through Australian eyes is avoided, or at least reduced.

**ACTIVITY 4**
Most people have an image of ‘the enemy’ as black pyjama-clad local peasants. This is only partly true. This activity will alert students to the existence of a variety of enemy soldiers, including women. This understanding will help students as they talk to veterans about their experiences.

**ACTIVITY 5**
Again this is a simple way of introducing the idea of variety and complexity to students’ understanding of the Australian experiences in Vietnam.

4 Interactive CD-ROM and DVD resources

Interactives on the *Australia and the Vietnam War* CD-ROM that are appropriate learning tasks for this unit are:

- **Dress a Paper Doll** to help them identify different participants in the war (Primary)
- **Explore the Camp at Nui Dat** (Primary and Secondary)
- **Compile a Photo Album** (Primary and Secondary)

Some images of soldiers’ daily lives are on the DVD Episode 7 (*The Vietnam War*) from the *Australians at War* documentary series.
What was Vietnam like?

Here are some images of Vietnam. Imagine that these are all you have, and that you have never been to any place like it.

1 Record your impressions and reactions.

2 What are the main differences to Australia? Are there any similarities?

3 How do you think Australian soldiers between 1962 and 1972 might have reacted to this place? Why?

4 What other factors might have influenced how the Australian troops responded to the Vietnamese? You will be able to test these ideas if you interview veterans about their experiences.

SOURCE 1 Some scenes from Vietnam

Stephen Lewis, My Vietnam, My Vietnam Trust, Adelaide, 2002, pages 156 (Norm Cooper), 106 (Norm Cooper, Eric Watson), 107 (Richard Cranna)
Why was Vietnam at war?

Here is a brief history of Vietnam over the last 100 years. Read it and answer these questions:

1. Why might Vietnamese people have been strongly nationalist?
2. What might have been the appeal of communism to many Vietnamese people?
3. Why was the government of South Vietnam facing both internal and external opposition?
4. The war had been described by some as a civil war and by others as an invasion. What do you think?

SOURCE 1 An outline history of Vietnam

Vietnam has a long history of invasion and resistance. According to Vietnamese legends, Vietnam dates back more than 4000 years. However, the most reliable sources show that their country’s history dates to about 2700 years ago.

For most of the period from 111 BC to early 10th century it was under the direct rule of China. Vietnam regained independence in 939 AD, but remained under strong Chinese influence.

Christian missionaries had been in Vietnam since the 17th century and in 1885 French forces took control of the area. The new area of Indochina was formed in October 1887 from Annam, Tonkin, Cochin China and the Khmer Republic. Laos was added in 1893.

In 1940, Japan invaded Indochina, coinciding with its ally, Germany’s, invasion of France. Keeping the German-controlled Vichy French colonial administration in place, the Japanese ruled from behind the scenes, with a Vietnamese Emperor as a powerless figurehead.

In 1941, Ho Chi Minh, a Communist revolutionary, returned to Vietnam and joined the Viet Minh, and led resistance to the Japanese.

In 1945 the Japanese surrendered and the Viet Minh claimed power in the north. However, in southern Vietnam the Japanese surrendered to British forces, which supported the return of the French. The French tried to regain the north, but were defeated in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu, leaving Ho Chi Minh as leader of North Vietnam and a western-backed Vietnamese government in charge in the south.

An international conference at Geneva developed an agreement in 1954 that temporarily partitioned the country into two states at the 17th parallel, with the Vietnamese people to be given a vote in 1956 to see who they wanted as the government of a reunified Vietnam.

The government of the South realised that they would lose any vote, so it was never held. The United States of America now began supporting South Vietnam, fearing that communism would spread throughout the region if they did not.

Supporters of Ho Chi Minh in South Vietnam now formed the National Liberation Front (NLF — also known as Viet Cong) to undermine the government of the South. The South’s President Ngo Dinh Diem began a harsh campaign against them.

This created great unrest among many South Vietnamese. Buddhist monks and nuns were joined by many students, business people, intellectuals and peasants in opposing Diem’s rule.

There was strong support for the NLF in many villages. To counteract this, Diem, supported by the United States, launched the Strategic Hamlets Program, to round up villagers and place them in ‘safe’ hamlets. The idea was to isolate the NLF from villagers, its base of support. The program created more opposition among people whose lives were being disrupted in this way.

By 1965, when Australian combat troops started arriving in South Vietnam, that nation was dependent on US support in its war against the local Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army forces.
Who was involved in the war?

Australia was not the only nation with service personnel in Vietnam. Here are those countries that were involved. (Note that ‘peak troop strength’ refers to the largest number of troops in the field at any one time, not the total number involved.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Peak troop strength</th>
<th>Deaths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>South Vietnam</td>
<td>1,048,000</td>
<td>185,528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>543,400</td>
<td>57,702</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>48,869</td>
<td>4,407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>7,672</td>
<td>520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Vietnam/Viet Cong</td>
<td>300,000</td>
<td>924,048</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>11,568</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republic of Taiwan</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


1. Cut out and paste in the appropriate national flag for each country.
2. Which countries made the greatest military contribution to the war?
3. You have seen why Australia was involved. Suggest reasons why most western nations were not involved. You will need to research this further to test your ideas.
Who were the enemy?

1. What is your image of the Viet Cong?
   Record your ideas, using these headings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appearance</th>
<th>Beliefs</th>
<th>Weapons</th>
<th>Tactics</th>
<th>Attitudes</th>
<th>Any other aspects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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Look at the drawing of the Viet Cong and Khmer Rouge guerrillas in Source 1 (opposite).

2. What is familiar or expected?

3. What, if anything, surprises you?

**SOURCE 1** Viet Cong and Khmer Rouge guerrillas


You can learn more about the enemy if you:
- Dress a Paper Doll
- Explore a Viet Cong Tunnel
Here are some descriptions by Australians of their contact with and attitudes to the enemy in Vietnam.

**SOURCE 3** Attitudes of Australian soldiers to the enemy

**A**

I had no feeling one way or the other towards Vietnamese soldiers or Viet Cong, until a good friend of mine was killed and then I had that hatred of the enemy soldier. That stayed with me for years.

Bob Searl interview for the film *Eyes of the Tiger – Diary of a Dirty War*, Let’s Play Productions, 2006

**B**

I hated them for what they did to their own people. There was a priest not far from us and he was decapitated and they put his head on a stake in a paddy field and a young village chief’s girl 13 years old hung upside down disembowelled ... basically disembowelling village chiefs who got friendly with Allies and taking all their food and depriving villagers of their rice. They were terrible, they basically ... fought their war with their own villagers with fear and intimidation and outrageous cowardly acts ... I have high regard for [North Vietnamese Army soldiers]— they were soldiers and though they operated different to us they did not do what VC cadres did to their own people.


**C**

Another incident I recall was during a company ambush. A lone NVA soldier wearing a pith helmet came down the foot track and as it was thought he might have been a scout for a larger group, he wasn’t fired on and was allowed to go through the ambush. After about an hour or so the same soldier came back down the track and he was engaged and killed. His body was checked for documents and the interpreter was reading through his diary; the VC and NVA tended to keep diaries, write stories, poetry, and that sort of thing. It transpired that he was an NVA conscript who had separated from his unit and just wanted to go home to his family. A young kid who didn’t want to be in South Viet Nam. He was down there against his will, he just wanted to go home. Seeing the person behind the uniform personalises war. Sad.


4 What different attitudes exist here?
5 Why might that variety exist?
5 What are the strengths and weaknesses of individual soldiers’ memories about their attitudes to the enemy?
Australian (and New Zealand) soldiers did not spend all their time in combat.

They lived in camps between operations (in the case of the fighting troops), or for most of the time (in the case of support personnel).

Here are some images of life in the camp at Nui Dat.

1. Give each a brief caption that explains what is shown. (You can check the actual captions on page 40.)

2. Use them to comment on these aspects of life for the soldiers:
   - Living conditions
   - Facilities
   - Activities
   - Entertainment
   - Tasks
   - Weather
   - Dress
   - Attitudes
   - Hygiene

What was life like for the Australian soldiers in camp?
You can learn more about the Australians if you:
• Dress a Paper Doll
• Explore the Camp at Nui Dat
• Prepare For Patrol

3 What do you think might have been the best aspects of this life?
4 What do you think might have been the worst aspects?
You can test your ideas by interviewing veterans.