Then someone called out ‘contact’ and the bloke behind me swore. And we hooked in there for hours, then a god-almighty roar. Frankie kicked a mine the day that mankind kicked the moon. God help me, he was going home in June.


**FOCUS QUESTIONS:**

> What was the nature of the Australians’ combat tactics?
> What was it like to be in combat?
From 1966 Australian forces from the Army and Air Force were based mainly in Phuoc Tuy province in Vietnam, though there was a squadron of Canberra bombers at Phan Rang airbase to the north, Headquarters staff in Vung Tau, and AATTV soldiers were spread throughout the country. Naval supply ships docked at Vung Tau and operated with US fleets in the South China Sea.

The role of the force

The role of a combat force is usually to engage the enemy and defeat it. This was how the Americans saw their role in Vietnam, but it was not how the Australian commanders saw their own role. Rather, they applied the theory of counter-revolutionary warfare they had learned recently in Malaya: the enemy should be denied access to its areas of supply — the local villages — and in this way it would wither and die, rather than be destroyed in any spectacular way.

This would be achieved in three main ways: by village cordon and search; by search and destroy of enemy camps; and by patrol and ambush.

Village cordon and search

A village cordon and search involved the Australians surrounding a village after dusk and stopping any movement in or out by enemy soldiers or supporters. Everyone knew that there was a curfew between dusk and dawn, so any movement during the night was presumed to be by the enemy. At dawn the troops would move in and search the village for any enemy soldiers, weapons or supplies. South Vietnamese Army officials would check papers and question people. If tunnel complexes were found, engineers (‘tunnel rats’) would explore them. Australian military and civilian personnel would at the same time provide health and dental checks and treatment — trying to win the villagers’ hearts and minds while their bodies were contained there. Families found to have helped the enemy would have their house destroyed.

Patrol and ambush

A second major tactic was patrolling and ambushing. A company would be taken into the jungle by road or helicopter and it would then move slowly and quietly to a pre-determined area, based on intelligence reports or known activity in the area and set an overnight ambush. Soldiers always had to be careful to avoid detection by the enemy, to avoid enemy ambushes and to avoid booby-traps — mines, or other devices designed to mutilate and disable numbers of men as much as to kill them. These operations required constant vigilance and put the men under constant stress. They might be out for three to six weeks, with limited food and water and little chance of real rest during the operation. Helicopters would re-supply water and combat rations every five days or so, as required.

Search and destroy

The third main type of action was the most hated — the search and destroy mission. This required approaching an enemy stronghold, which was usually almost impossible to see before actually arriving on top of it, but which was sited to allow devastating defensive fire to be unleashed against the approaching Australian troops. The base would then be searched and destroyed. These operations were conducted by larger groups than for ambushes and included armoured personnel carriers and often tanks.

Other tasks

There were also regular perimeter patrols around the Nui Dat camp and troops were used to protect Fire Support Bases — areas where artillery was set up to allow the patrolling troops a greater area of operation (or Tactical Area of Responsibility — TAOR) away from Nui Dat to cover more of the province.

The RAAF and RAN experience

The RAAF crewed helicopters for a variety of tasks in the war — as gunships, for transportation of people and equipment, for medical evacuations from the sites of contacts. Often these activities were carried out under enemy fire. They also flew and maintained Canberra bombers, and transport planes — mainly the Caribou and Hercules. Several aircraft were damaged or destroyed through enemy activities. RAAF service personnel also maintained and guarded the planes and their crews, and provided all the facilities needed at airports and bases.

The Royal Australian Navy provided the troop carrier HMAS Sydney and the supply ship HMAS Jeparit. The Sydney was considered a prime target and had warship and sometimes submarine escort on its trips. The ships were also guarded in port by Navy divers. Several Australian warships provided covering fire for ground operations, and some came under enemy fire. Some Navy helicopter crews also operated with Allied forces.
Large-scale battles were rare, but are the best known of the actions that Australians were involved in during the war. For example, the Battle of Long Tan (1966) was a fierce fight that involved 108 Australian infantry soldiers against an estimated 3500 Vietnamese, until reinforcements arrived; the Battles of Coral and Balmoral (1968) lasted intermittently over 26 days and saw Australia’s largest casualty rate for one operation, 25 dead; and the Battle of Binh Ba (1969), a fierce six-hour contact fought in a village, a rare event for Australians in the Vietnam War.

Tet offensive 1968

Australian troops had some involvement in the famous Tet Offensive of 1968. During this offensive North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces launched simultaneous attacks at over 100 sites in South Vietnam. Australian troops fought them in an attack on the provincial capital, Ba Ria. The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese suffered a devastating military defeat in these attacks, but they won an overwhelming tactical victory as media reports emphasised the horror of the war and the apparent strength of the enemy in being able to attack even the United States embassy building in Saigon.

Features of the Australian experience of combat

Some key elements in the Australian experience of combat in Vietnam were:

- the small-scale nature of many operations — this was generally a war fought at the platoon (about 30 men) or at best company level (about 120 men), rather than the large battalion scale, with the main officers being the young and inexperienced second lieutenants who were in the line of fire with their men, and their section non-commissioned officers (NCOs);
- the role of armoured personnel carriers (APCs), with their ability to bring fresh troops to an operation;
- the role of artillery, able to bring huge firepower with almost pinpoint accuracy to help troops engaged in operations;
- the use of helicopters, able to move troops to a position, re-supply them every 5–7 days and evacuate casualties from the battlefield to the hospital operating table usually within 30 minutes. Most soldiers were not killed outright in a firefight and the ability to treat the wounded so quickly meant the saving of many lives;
- the use of field radio sets to communicate with headquarters and co-ordinate swift support when needed;
- the professionalism of the Australian troops, whether professional regular soldiers or conscripts;
- the qualities of leadership in the field from officers, NCOs and men — largely the result of effective training.

Behaviour in combat

How did Australians behave in combat? Most men did not see much combat action, even on patrols. Most of the patrol was boring routine. But there was the knowledge that at any moment the routine could be shattered. When that happened, in nearly all cases training kicked in and men responded in appropriate ways. Nearly all showed the courage to endure and behave well.

In some cases there was heroism — that unexpected and uncommon response by one person that goes beyond what others do in the same situation.

Some felt the exhilaration of battle, as well as its terribleness.

Peer pressure, training, trust, mateship, courage, hatred or a seeking of vengeance, and sometimes acceptance — all played their part in men being able to face combat.

Many soldiers believed that mines, rather than actual fighting, were the worst aspect of their experience. A mine was not necessarily set to kill a man. It was enough to injure and disable him. Once a man was injured the whole unit was crippled, at least temporarily. The mine also created fear and apprehension, and could lead to men concentrating only on their next step and not looking out for the enemy. Some expressed the desire to die rather than survive as disabled, but most of those who were injured were keen to resume life.

A study of a typical battalion, 8RAR, shows that most men did not shoot accurately under the pressure of combat. The vegetation, fear, excitement, nerves and even a reluctance to kill another person meant that many enemy soldiers escaped even from very close combat.

Accusations

Many Australian soldiers saw horrors and other brutal realities of war, but most behaved as morally and ethically as could be done in the circumstances. There are no known examples of atrocities or abuses among Australians like the My Lai massacre by American troops. All available evidence about the Australians suggests strongly that they generally operated ethically and honourably. The battalion histories and the many books of reminiscences being written occasionally report aspects that bring them no credit — not burying dead enemy properly, killing the badly wounded, shooting enemy who had surrendered or who were clearly no threat, looting the dead — but these are isolated and not typical incidents.
2 Key outcomes

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

- Understand how the Australians fought the war
- Empathise with the situation of servicemen in combat
- Describe the Battle of Long Tan
- Appreciate the horrific nature of war
- Understand the qualities needed by servicemen and women

3 Classroom activities

**Activity 1**
The activities in this unit are designed to help students explore the nature of combat in Vietnam. It will help if they are asked to make explicit their existing ideas, some of which may be inaccurate or not true to the Australian experience.

**Activity 2**
This activity helps students start to ‘test’ their ideas. The photographs are all official ones and these rarely showed any actual combat, or any details of Australian casualties. Some of the documents in the next activity are much more explicit and teachers may prefer not to show students the more graphic evidence.

**Activity 3**
This activity contains a great deal of information. It is suggested that it could be divided among groups, with each group reporting back on what it has discovered to complete the list on page 51. Students could start to speculate on the question: are these experiences likely to influence the men on their return to Australia and more normal life? The point could also be made that these experiences are probably true for all troops who were involved in the war, regardless of which country they fought for or whose side they were on.

**Activity 4**
This activity summarises the action that has become associated with the official Australian commemoration of the war.

**Activity 5**
In this activity students have the chance to be decision makers. It is based on a real situation, and students should have enough information to make reasoned decisions. It does not matter if they are not accurate, the key thing is that students discuss the principles involved, and can understand why the commander made the decisions he did.

**Activity 6**
This activity focuses specifically on treating the wounded and ill. The key element in the Vietnam War was the availability of helicopters to move the wounded from battle to a hospital quickly. Death rates from wounds were greatly reduced in this way.

**Activity 7**
Everything has been leading to this activity — learning enough about the war to be able to speak sensitively with veterans. A veteran can be invited along to speak to the class, or students can be asked to contact veterans to interview them. Teachers or students should work through the local RSL or Vietnam veterans’ organisations for help in finding and approaching appropriate people.

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 identify different participants in the war (Primary)
- **Write a Letter** describing a combat experience (Primary and Secondary)
- **Explore a Viet Cong Tunnel** (Primary and Secondary)
- **Prepare for Patrol** (Primary and Secondary)
- **Produce a News Report on Long Tan** (Secondary)
- **Explore the Camp at Nui Dat** (Primary and Secondary)

Episode 7 (*The Vietnam War*) of the *The Australians at War* documentary series supplied on DVD with this resource, has rich historic film and interviews covering all aspects of the soldiers’ experiences and especially the Battle of Long Tan.
Every one of us has an image of warfare and battle. What is your image of the Vietnam War? Brainstorm your ideas and record them under these headings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Where</th>
<th>When</th>
<th>Weapons</th>
<th>Enemy</th>
<th>Type of fighting</th>
<th>Attitudes</th>
<th>Others?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

You will be able to test all these ideas in this topic and come back at the end to see if you would add to or change any of these initial ideas.

You might also discuss where your ideas have come from and how accurate they are likely to be for Australians in the Vietnam War.

Now imagine that you are in charge of sending a combat force to another country.

You will set up your own base in an area. There are enemy forces in the area, as well as local civilians who are just trying to live their everyday lives. Some of the enemy are professional soldiers, others operate from within villages — they seem to be ordinary people by day, but by night they help take food, ammunition, information and recruits to the enemy. Sometimes they terrorise villagers and force them to help, but at other times villagers are on the enemy’s side. Much of the area is jungle and much is rice paddies and rubber tree plantations. You have superior weapons and technology, especially communications, artillery and control of the skies. You control the area by day, the enemy controls it by night.

What is your aim or aims? You may choose one or several. Explain your choices.

You will be able to test all these ideas in this topic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aim/s</th>
<th>Reason/s</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Defeat the enemy in battle</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Help the local people live safe lives</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Support the local government</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tactic/s</th>
<th>Reason/s</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Draw the enemy into large battles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Cut the enemy off from the villages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Sit in the base and wait for the enemy to come</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Go out and patrol the area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Stick to the villages and roads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Operate in the jungle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Other— Explain</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In 1966 the Australians established themselves in Phuoc Tuy Province as their main area of operation. They set up a camp at Nui Dat as the base from which fighting forces would operate. Australian patrols set out from here, usually carried by trucks, armoured personnel carriers (APCs) or helicopters to a particular place, from where they started patrolling on foot. The soldiers were rarely sent beyond the reach of artillery support, so several artillery Fire Support Bases (defended outposts from where artillery could support the infantry) were set up to enable the patrolling troops’ area of operations to be increased.

The Australians also created a supply base at the port of Vung Tau. Supplies and equipment would arrive here from Australia or from American supply bases in Vietnam (especially at Long Binh in Bien Hoa) and would be sent by road, inland water or air to Nui Dat.

The enemy were of two main types — local guerrillas (Viet Cong — VC), who operated constantly in the area with the willing or forced support of the villagers; and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regular troops, who were more likely to be in the area only occasionally and based in a hidden camp while a particular operation was being implemented.

The Australian aim was not to defeat the enemy in major battle, but to gain control of their area (or Tactical Area of Responsibility — TAOR). This could be achieved by cutting off the guerrilla forces from their sources of food, money and recruits in the villages. If the VC were denied food and supplies, they either had to focus on getting new supplies rather than fighting, or they had to withdraw to other, safer areas.

The Australians had three main ways of achieving this: by cordon and search of villages; by search and destroy operations against enemy camps; and by patrolling and ambushing the enemy as they moved through the area. It was rare to have a large-scale battle.

Most operations were at a company level (about 120 men), or a platoon level (about 30 men). Most required stealth, patience, discipline and training. For most of the time on patrol the Australians were not in contact with the enemy — though there was always the possibility that such contact might happen at any time. Most patrols did not even see the enemy. Men might stay out on patrol for up to six weeks, carrying 5–7 days’ food that could be re-supplied as needed by helicopter.

Patrols were not pleasant. The conditions were generally hot, often in pouring rain and mud, with snakes, leeches, little food and barely enough water. Food often had to be eaten cold. Men could not smoke (and many were addicted to nicotine). They had to know how to move safely through thick jungle, mined roads and tracks and open paddy fields, all while carrying heavy loads. They had to know how to treat innocent locals, as well as how...
to engage armed enemies. They often had to lay silently through the night in an ambush position, or assault a heavily fortified enemy bunker system. They had to try to distinguish between friendly and hostile local people, as well as avoiding firing on their own comrades in the terror and fog of a firefight. Stress was ever-present.

**Organisation and arrival of the infantry forces**

The basic combat unit in Vietnam was the infantry battalion, supported by artillery and APCs.

The infantry battalion had about 800 men. It was divided into a headquarters section, and four Rifle Companies. The Rifle Companies did the actual fighting. Each company had five officers and 118 men, organised into three rifle platoons (1 officer and 33 men). Each platoon was organised into three sections.

The infantry might also have some engineers with them (for example, to deal with mines or search tunnels). They could call up help from APCs and tanks, artillery, helicopters, and even at times American or Australian bombers and war ships.

What qualities did it take to operate in these conditions? What was it like to be in combat in Vietnam? What happened to the men in these situations? The following pages explore aspects of their experience in more detail.

Look at the following photographs showing aspects of Australian combat activities. Briefly describe what each helps you to understand about the nature of the war.

(You can check your ideas against the official caption for each photograph on page 50.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Photograph</th>
<th>Helps me to realise that ...</th>
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<tbody>
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Scenes from combat
CAPTIONS:

A. Finger talk signals plan of action. AWM CUN/66/0179/VM
B. Soldiers from 7RAR wait through a tropical downpour on the battalion heli pad to carry out helicopter winching training with tracking dogs, Tiber and Justin. AWM EKN/67/0097/VN
C. Two members of 103 Field Battery, Royal Australian Artillery, firing a 105mm 15 pack howitzer from a gun pit at 1ATF. AWM EKN/66/0065/VN
D. Four infantrymen rush an injured mate to a waiting helicopter for evacuation for medical treatment at the 1st Australian Field Hospital, Vung Tau. AWM WAR/70/0601/VN
E. One of the Cavalry Regiment's M108 mobile howitzers that were on loan from the American military to the Australians. AWM P01636.014
F. Searching for mines. AWM CAM/68/0136/VN
G. Australian APCs of 1 APC Squadron. AWM CUN/66/0705B/VN
H. Viet Cong prisoners being loaded into a RAAF Iroquois helicopter of No 9 Squadron, after being captured by soldiers of the 6th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (6RAR). AWM COL/67/0130/VN
I. Members of the 6th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (6RAR) running to a RAAF Iroquois helicopter (also known as a Huey) while they are on patrol in the Nui Dinh Mountains. AWM P02629.028
J. Private Jack Trease of Mirboo North, Vic, pauses briefly during a reconnaissance patrol in Phuoc Tuy Province. AWM FOD/71/0254/VN
K. A RAN Helicopter Flight Vietnam (RANHFV) door gunner attached to the US Army 135th Assault Helicopter Company, at the Bearcat base in Bien Hoa Province, South Vietnam. AWM NAVY19683
L. Members of 1st Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR), search the clothing of one of a number of captured Viet Cong. AWM SHA/65/0291/VN
M. Briefing by Captain Guy Griffiths (centre), the commanding officer of the Guided Missile Destroyer HMAS Hobart which was off Danang. A Tartar anti-aircraft missile, affixed to its mount, forms the background. AWM NAVY13540
N. The port lookout at his position as HMAS Hobart is closed up for action station. AWM NAVYM0167/05
O. A door gunner of a No 9 Squadron RAAF Iroquois helicopter. AWM VN/66/0047/16

You can learn more about this if you:
- Dress a Paper Doll to identify different participants in the war
- Explore the Camp at Nui Dat
What was combat like for Australian soldiers in Vietnam?

The following sources provide evidence from some individuals about their experiences of combat in Vietnam. Look at these and summarise what you learn about these aspects of the soldiers’ experiences:

- The qualities shown
- Emotions felt
- Variety of combat situations faced
- Dangers
- Attitudes to fighting
- Attitudes to possible injury or death
- What helped them survive
- Effectiveness of their training
- Attitude to the enemy
- How effective they were
- Aspects that might affect them in later life

**SOURCE 1**  
Viet Cong history of the war in Phuoc Tuy province

Throughout the year 1970, the Australian tactics of [cordon and search of villages] created an extremely tense situation for us. 245 of our cadres and soldiers were killed. In the villages, 188 of our agents were arrested and put in gaol and 162 young men were forced to join the army. We suffered a very serious lack of food; our cadres and soldiers had to eat leaves gathered in the jungle; only the wounded were allowed a thin rice gruel.

**SOURCE 2**  
On sentry at night during a patrol

One night I was on picquet in a rubber plantation, half asleep. All of a sudden I could hear something coming through the rubber behind our position. I couldn’t make out what was going on as there seemed to be a big group and they were fairly well spread out. So I picked up the starlight scope [for seeing at night], but I was shaking that much I couldn’t see out of it and I nearly gave myself a black eye trying to look out of it. All it turned out to be was a mob of pigs.

**SOURCE 3**  
The infantry man’s pack

I was carrying the lightest weight in the platoon and I was carrying about 80 pounds [36 kilograms]. Bruno had about 93 to 100 pounds of ammunition, pack and machine gun. He was so overloaded that if he leant forward and you pushed him, he couldn’t stop moving for 10 or 12 paces. I mean, it was a bit ridiculous really, but those were the weights we were carrying.

**SOURCE 4**  
Fear

I’ve seen blokes, and been one of them, walking around with wet pants after a contact.

**SOURCE 5**  
Two episodes from an ambush

A [I was] very excited, adrenalin pumping, anxious that myself and the [machine] gunner were 100 per cent ready for our first combat … [When the firing started I was] calm and collected, remembering the months of training beforehand particularly [the need for] well-aimed shots and counting your shots … I don’t recall any fear at that point … My actions, indeed the whole section’s actions, were under the control of all the training we had received … trying to do what we were taught. I definitely remember taking aimed shots at the [enemy] closest to me … It wasn’t until we had a chance to rest and have a smoke [and] I thought about the shot-up bodies that I felt fear — real fear — and it must have been obvious because, as I was trying to light a cigarette, “Dinger” Bell asked me why I was shaking.

B I knew with [the soldier who had shot the woman] — he was a very quiet guy — that I may have a bit more problem … because he kept away from most of us during the day while we were digging the graves and everything else. I was just watching him. That’s why I hustled up with him that night … and I just thought that [this soldier] was, you know, [feeling] bad … so I pulled him back in to depth with me. He cried and carried on and I hit him to shut him up. He was really worried. He said he was going to pack up and walk out. He was going to leave his rifle and gear and everything else. He started crying, I said: ‘Shut up! You’re going to draw the crabs.’ And he wouldn’t, so I hit him … He stayed there all night. Never went to sleep. Every time I woke up he was just lying there, on his back, looking straight up. I felt rotten about the fact that I did it, but I felt I had no choice.
**SOURCE 6 First contact**

Then it happened: my moment of truth. I know I had fired lots of shots in anger before but I didn’t see anyone before, only voices and noise coming from the enemy’s direction. But this time I could see him trying to crawl away I didn’t want to pull the trigger but I couldn’t let him get away. It seemed a lifetime, and then I found out what I was made of. I pulled the trigger and he didn’t move anymore.

I felt so sad I thought of my mum and dad. How would they feel if it was me at the other end. All that night I felt sad, scared, but glad I had done my job …

It wasn’t till the welcome home march [in 1987] that a group of us were talking about our experiences, that I finally stopped feeling guilty for what I had done, and if it wasn’t for my friends, or should I say brothers, I would still feel guilty now. That [night in Vietnam] was one night I will never forget. It made me appreciate life.

**SOURCE 7 The chaos of war**

There was so much going on it was incredible … You just couldn’t keep control of what was going on … You were yelling to guys who could see and they were too taken up with their jobs. . . . You try and shoot — you know, you’ve got to shoot — but you’re so wound up it’s incredible.

**SOURCE 8 Mateship**

Someone to talk to, joke with, laugh at, give you a helping hand if you needed it, back you in a fight, drink with and give you real support. Mateship welded the unit together.

**SOURCE 9 Bravery**

An APC [armoured personnel carrier] from Headquarters Section was hit by two RPG [Rocket Propelled Grenades] rounds and began to burn. Barry Coe … jumped off [our APC] and ran over … Your instinct was to help but your training was to stay put — you know. He jumped off and did what you wanted to do. But he was a corporal. That was the difference. He was a fellow who could do it, you know.

**SOURCE 10 Attitude to killing and death**

We were young, ‘unblooded’, well trained and never seemed to be worried by the enemy. My main concerns were for the serious consequences a careless action by one of my own section could cause. I think, later on, as the body count of dead mates added up, more caution was exercised.

**SOURCE 11 Loss of a mate to ‘friendly fire’**

I often feel for that poor bugger [who fired the SLR rifle] because it certainly wasn’t his fault. I mean, we would have all done it. I often think of him. I often think I should endeavour to try and contact him. I don’t know what he’s going through. I mean, you just don’t forget that wouldn’t you?

**SOURCE 12 Attitude to the enemy after a mine incident**

I hated the enemy then, and God knows what would have happened should I have had some at my mercy.
On 18 August 1966, D Company, 6th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (6RAR), was patrolling in the area of the Long Tan rubber plantation when, at about 3.15pm, the lead platoon saw a small group of Viet Cong. They fired on the enemy, who dispersed. D Company continued their patrol — and suddenly encountered a very large enemy force.

There was intense fighting as the platoon tried to work its way back to the rest of the company. They did not know that the other platoons were also under heavy fire. About 108 soldiers (including three New Zealanders) were now in battle against an enemy of more than 2000 troops.

The fighting was intense. The plantation, already gloomy, was made darker by a tropical downpour. Men were being killed by rifle and machine gun bullets, mortars and shrapnel from grenades fired into trees to blast splinters into the sheltering soldiers.

The Australians were nearly surrounded, isolated, and running out of ammunition. They radioed for help. A RAAF helicopter braved the intense enemy fire against it to drop ammunition among the troops. Artillery was pouring in only metres ahead of the defenders. A slight error would land shells among them.

Towards the end of the day, after several hours, Australian armoured personnel carriers (APCs) suddenly tore into the attacking enemy, their machine guns firing. The APCs carried relieving troops. The enemy slowly melted away into the dark.

Two Australian wounded now had to endure a terrifying night alone on the battlefield. They could hear the enemy moving among the bodies, checking for wounded friends as well as wounded opponents.

Finally, at first light, Australian troops were able to move forward and search for the two men, get them help and inspect the terrible battlefield. Eighteen Australians and at least 245 enemy were killed and many were wounded.

Look at this painting of a scene during the battle.

1. Describe the sights, sounds, smells and feelings that the artist is suggesting.
2. What qualities did the men show?
3. What made them able to operate so successfully in such a situation?

The Battle of Long Tan is not a typical situation faced by Australians during the Vietnam War, but it has been chosen to represent the war and 18 August is now Vietnam Veterans’ Day. Why do you think it has been chosen as the ‘iconic’ event to represent the Vietnam War? Do you think it is a good choice? Explain your views.
How did the medical system work?

The medical system had to be able to deal with battle casualties in the field and injuries and illness. The Australian system in Vietnam included these elements:

- hospital with medical and surgical facilities
- Regimental Aid Post for simple illnesses at Nui Dat
- dustoff helicopters to carry wounded from the conflict
- access to American hospitals in Vietnam that had more specialised staff if needed
- medical evacuation flights to Australian hospitals for long-term wounds

Imagine that a soldier has just been wounded. Look at these photographs showing how the system worked. Provide a caption for each photo and then arrange them in a sequence that shows the steps in the system.
Here are some comments from people involved in the process. Read them and add any information to your summaries of the aspects of the soldiers’ experiences on page 51.

**SOURCE 1** Al Jones, 9 Squadron, RAAF, Helicopter Crew Chief, 1968 and 1970

I hated doing dustoffs the most. You could never key yourself up; we used to psych ourselves up for a dustoff. The worst dustoff I ever got called out for was for a mine incident. Gunshot wounds were manageable and relatively clean, but mines — the guys were just blown to bits. It was frightening. It was appalling.

**SOURCE 2** Geoffrey Barlow, Pharmacist, 8th Field Ambulance, Vung Tau, 1968-69

I did not come across any patient, sick or wounded, that was not cast in the mould of the Australian soldier that you read about in the First or Second World Wars. In spite of everything, they were generally optimistic and uncomplaining. They accepted their lot and were grateful for anything that was done for them. There were of course the usual pranks as their condition improved. Those patients that were transferred to us from US hospitals were very happy to be with their own kind. I have no doubt that the character we know as the Australian Digger is still with us.

**SOURCE 3** Leslie McGurgan, Nursing Sister, 1st Australian Field Hospital, Vung Tau, 1970

The whole time I was there I didn’t actually see anyone physically die — not one. Our survival rate was quite incredible once we got people into triage.

The support the Diggers gave one another was superb and was very, very touching. The hardest part for them was when they were coming up to medevac time and having to return to Australia. Many of them had lost an arm or leg and while they were a member of what was like a close family they were okay, but when it came time for them to go home they had a lot of problems. It was great to see their friends come down from Nui Dat to give them support and courage and I think the support they got from their visiting friends was as important as what we gave them, if not more. It was very, very important and it gave them a lift.

**SOURCE 4** Marie Findlay, Nursing Sister, 1st Australian Field Hospital, Vung Tau, 1968-69

The patients had a very positive attitude and morale was high — if they had only one hand they would be playing cards with the other chaps in the ward. We visited the American hospital and their soldiers didn’t seem nearly as cheerful. The Australian soldiers showed courage and were really concerned about their mates. I’m sure being nursed in an Australian hospital meant a lot to them. They were grateful for small mercies. The hospital food wasn’t all that wonderful and we often had etherised eggs, where the flavour is lost, yet they would still exclaim, ‘Wow, a real Aussie breakfast’. Some soldiers had spent time in an American hospital and they found their food a bit hard to take.

**SOURCE 5** Mary Purser (née Shale), Nursing Sister, 1st Australian Field Hospital, Vung Tau, 1971

You became very close to the patients in a mothering sort of way. They needed more than a nurse, they needed a friend to talk to. They were very young and some of them had barely left school.

**SOURCE 6** Dr Ted Heffernan, 1966-67

All injuries were tough to treat, I suppose. I guess the ones where you can’t do much and you know they will die are really tough. As doctors we were told by some Second World War fellows before we went to Viet Nam, ‘War is long periods of boredom punctuated by periods of intense activity’, and that is what it was like. In the year I guess I personally treated about 70 cases of malaria, roughly 70 battle casualties and 1000 fresh cases, and about 4000 reviews and recurrences of VD, mainly from R & R [Rest and Recreation] in Vung Tau.

Gary McKay, Bullets, Beans and Bandages, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1999, passim
One of the best learning activities possible for the Vietnam War is to talk to veterans. This can be done by inviting a veteran to talk to your class, or by interviewing somebody. We have not provided you with a list of specific questions, but below you will see a number of areas that you might be interested in asking the veteran about. More information about each of these is in this resource, either in print, as film, or as interactive exercises, or all three. It would help if you know something about each area before you talk to your veteran.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal details</th>
<th>Name, age, rank during the war</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge about the war</td>
<td>Did you know much about it before you went? Where did your information come from? Did you support or oppose Australian involvement? Did you support or oppose conscription?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of service</td>
<td>Force (Army, Navy, Air Force) and if Army – Regular, National Service or Citizens’ Military Force (CMF)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruit Training</td>
<td>Where? When? Experiences? Your opinion of it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corps</td>
<td>Which one? Main job? Where posted? More training?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posted to Vietnam</td>
<td>Did you volunteer to go? Did you have a choice? Attitudes and expectations? Well prepared?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience in Vietnam</td>
<td>When sent? How did you travel there? (eg HMAS Sydney, Qantas flight, some other flight?) Where based? With whom? Main job or role? Typical day?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>To the war? To other allied troops – USA, Vietnamese? To local Vietnamese civilians? Enemy – VC/NLA? To regulars/national servicemen? To officers/men? To protesters in Australia? To posties/unionists? To politicians?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R &amp; R, R &amp; C</td>
<td>How often taken? Where visit?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflections</td>
<td>Highlights/lowlights? What kept you and others going? Difficult?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homecoming</td>
<td>How long were you there? How did you come back? Any formal parade? Reactions on return? — Stress personal knowledge only. How accepted?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After the war</td>
<td>Back into society? RSL/ex-service organisation issues? 1987 Welcome Home important to you?</td>
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</tbody>
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CAPTIONS FOR ACTIVITY 5, PAGES 54-55:
A Long hours of tending to the medical needs of this wounded Australian soldier await RAAF Nurse Jane Elizabeth Passmore, of Hobart, Tas, as she checks his condition on board a RAAF Hercules transport aircraft en route to Australia from South Vietnam. AWM MAL/66/0004/01
B One of the seven soldiers from B Platoon, C Company, 5th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (RAR), injured by shrapnel from a booby-trap grenade. AWM P01353.008
C At the 8th Field Ambulance dustoff pad at Nui Dat, a wounded soldier is unloaded from a RAAF Iroquois chopper which has winched him out of the jungle. This dustoff mission resulted from an enemy contact in which six Australians were killed and 14 wounded on 6 August 1967. AWM VN/67/0104/20
D The theatre sister at the 1st Australian Field Hospital, Lieutenant Yvonne Wemdry of Riverdale, WA, puts a preliminary dressing on minor fragmentation wounds. Minutes before the soldier had been on a dustoff helicopter bringing him from the jungle to the hospital for treatment. AWM COM/69/0477/VN