

# ***THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY AND THE VIETNAM WAR 1962-1972***

## ***INTRODUCTION*** **Lieutenant General Peter Leahy**

Thirty years ago, the Australian Army withdrew from Vietnam. While it had not been defeated on the battlefield, the Army had not achieved a strategic victory. It withdrew from a country in which its professional reputation as a fighting army was acknowledged and respected by all sides and returned to a country which appeared not to value its professionalism or appreciate its achievements.

This contradiction of reputation has for too long coloured the way in which Australians, both soldiers and citizens, approach any examination of the war in Vietnam. For too long, our understanding of the war, particularly the tactical and operational lessons to be derived from it, has been distorted by the political and emotional baggage we have brought with us from those years. The community has recently moved beyond the divisions caused by the war and welcomed the Vietnam Veterans home. The military history community needs to do likewise—to move on from the emotional and intellectual dogmas of the war years and approach study and analysis of the war with openness and objectivity. A number of veterans have been producing good books on their experiences and the rest of the official history is not far away. I hope that these initiatives, together with events like this conference, will kick-start a new wave of objective studies of Australia's involvement in the war.

The Army today has much to learn from the Vietnam years. It resembles much more closely the type of operations we have been conducting since 1998 than do the operations of the Divisions and Corps of the two World Wars. (I do recognise that in the current world climate, this fact could easily be reversed!) Counter revolutionary warfare, counter insurgency warfare, low intensity conflict: the names may change but the method of fighting them does not. Clear, identifiable and valuable lessons on tactics and operations of enduring value to Army can still be extracted from past operations in this type of conflict. If we are prepared to make this effort. Could the Infantry section patrolling the border at Maliana today learn anything useful from the experiences of a patrol in the Long Hai hills? I contend that it could. Has the Army incorporated this knowledge in the training regime of the contemporary army? Again, I contend that it has—but I accept that it could exploit this knowledge much more.

Army understands this. Recent initiatives point to the importance Army places on mining previous experiences for useful product to improve our efficiency on the modern battlefield. The new centre for Army lessons at Puckapunyal has already begun a comprehensive program of analysis of present and past conflicts. The Land Warfare Studies Centre has been at the forefront of using analysis of past conflicts to underpin judgements on the likely shape of future warfare. And, of course, this conference is part of that process as well.

It is a matter of some pride for me, personally, that after initiating the first Military History Conference eight years ago while head of the Directorate of Army Research and Analysis, the idea has grown into the major event it now is. I understand it is the largest conference of its type in Australia and, from the excellence of the published proceedings, in a class of its own for intellectual rigour and breadth of inquiry. The conference has built up an impressive body of knowledge of direct relevance to the Australian Army and how it does its business. This year's conference clearly maintains the standard.

Vietnam was a topic chosen with some care. It was a war of the fighting soldier. Platoon commanders could influence the outcome of the war. Superior Infantry skills were prerequisites both for survival and success on the battlefield. At a time when most of the world was preoccupied with the probable clash of armoured corps in North West Europe,

Vietnam was largely an infantry war, and Australia's Army, which has a strong infantry tradition, appeared to find its niche in this type of warfare. What was it about the way the Australian Task Force conducted operations that fostered this perception? What did the Australian Army 'do right' in Vietnam that made it effective? Could it have improved, both in the preparation for and in the conduct of operations? That is what this conference will uncover.

Previous conferences have had their focus on the Army at the highest level—as a strategic entity, as an allied element in a much larger force or as a collection of colonial force elements in a war of Empire. This conference is much more inwardly focussed. It will examine the Army itself—how it prepared for operations, how it learned from its experience and where it could have improved. Because of the links I mentioned earlier between Vietnam operations and those the Army is currently conducting, I believe much will come out of our discussions here that will be valuable to our soldiers in the field now. If, as a result of our deliberations, we improve but one thing, and thereby save one future soldier from injury or death, it will have been worth our effort.