

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

***MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF TRAINING AND PREPARING  
ELEMENTS OF 1st BATTALION, ROYAL NEW ZEALAND  
INFANTRY REGIMENT, FOR SERVICE IN SOUTH VIETNAM,  
1967-1971***

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The French withdrawal followed by the Geneva conference's 'temporary' partition of Vietnam at the 17th Parallel, together with the subsequent developments in Indo-China, resulted in a dramatic shift in New Zealand's stance towards security in Southeast Asia. This was evident in 1954 when New Zealand joined the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, the Philippines, Thailand and Pakistan in signing the South-East Asia Collective Defence Treaty (SEACDT) and thereafter in joining the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO). By so doing New Zealand accepted a security commitment to the region to be formalised shortly thereafter by its adoption of the strategy of 'Forward Defence in Southeast Asia'.

Both the ANZUS Alliance (1951) and SEATO became the prime elements in New Zealand's defence policy and the subsequent adherence to the obligations and principles of both these treaties were significant factors in determining New Zealand's political philosophy and subsequently the extent of its military involvement in South Vietnam.

During the lull in the Vietnam conflict in the late 1950s New Zealand's regional security role was focussed primarily within a Commonwealth context, particularly with respect to Singapore and Malaya and was evident in the deployment of elements of all three services to the area, viz a Special Air Service Squadron, 1 New Zealand Regiment (to become 1RNZIR), a naval frigate, a Canberra Strike Squadron and a Transport Squadron RNZAF.

By the early 1960s and thereafter when the conflict in Vietnam again flared up, and as the military and political situation steadily worsened, the consequent escalation of American involvement resulted in considerable pressure from Washington for its ANZUS allies either to commit or increase their military contribution.

New Zealand's response was never as robust as that of Australia and was predicated on an underlying scepticism at the highest political levels about the credibility of the American view that a military solution was achievable in South Vietnam. Added to this was the general view that New Zealand as a small country with very limited defence resources (and taking account of its already significant commitment to Singapore/Malaya and the Commonwealth Strategic Reserve) was not really able to make a military contribution that would assist materially in the conduct of the war.

Indeed apart from a Civilian Medical/Surgical team followed by a troop of Engineers in 1964 to assist in reconstruction work, it was not until May 1965 that the New Zealand Government, having confirmed the importance of supporting its ANZUS allies, approved the dispatch of an Artillery Battery (161 Battery, RNZA, of 120 men) to South Vietnam. This decision marked the first occasion that New Zealand would enter combat without the United Kingdom, and in so doing reflected the renewed significance that the United States and Australia had now assumed in official security doctrine.

In essence the New Zealand policy that evolved for South Vietnam had been dictated by alliance needs, with the primary goal being to preserve cordial relations with both the United States and Australia and thereby ensure that New Zealand's ultimate security guarantee remained intact. To achieve this goal the Government was quite prepared to forgo its doubts about military intervention, and support US policy, but at the minimum possible cost in terms of its military commitment and resources, financial effort and domestic political impact.

This essay aims to place New Zealand's commitment to the war in South Vietnam in perspective, bearing in mind the constraints imposed by SEATO obligations and New Zealand's participation in the Commonwealth Strategic Reserve. Particular reference will be made to the infantry contribution, by examining:

- the availability, training and preparation of those elements of 1RNZIR to be deployed; and, thereafter,
- the consequences of the deployment policy so adopted.

### **Status of 1RNZIR within the Commonwealth Strategic Reserve**

New Zealand involvement in the Commonwealth Strategic Reserve (28 Comwel Inf Bde Gp) saw 1RNZIR in Malaysia reach a professional peak in 1967. Tactical skills had been honed at unit level by on-going operations on the Thai/Malay border, and thereafter by the deployment of 1RNZIR on two tours of Borneo in Confrontation with Indonesia in 1965-66.

The ending of Confrontation in mid-1966 allowed 28 Comwel Inf Bde Gp of which 1RNZIR, 4th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment, and 1 Scots Guards were then the Infantry component, to focus on and train for its primary role as the Commonwealth Strategic Reserve for the SEATO alliance. This resulted in the conduct of a wide range of formation exercises based on the insurgency scenarios envisaged in the various SEATO Contingency Plans applicable to the SEATO Protocol States, Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam, in all of which 1RNZIR featured as one of the vanguard 'fly in' units in the event of any of these contingencies being activated. At the time, therefore, these exercises were relevant and directly applicable to operations then being undertaken in South Vietnam.

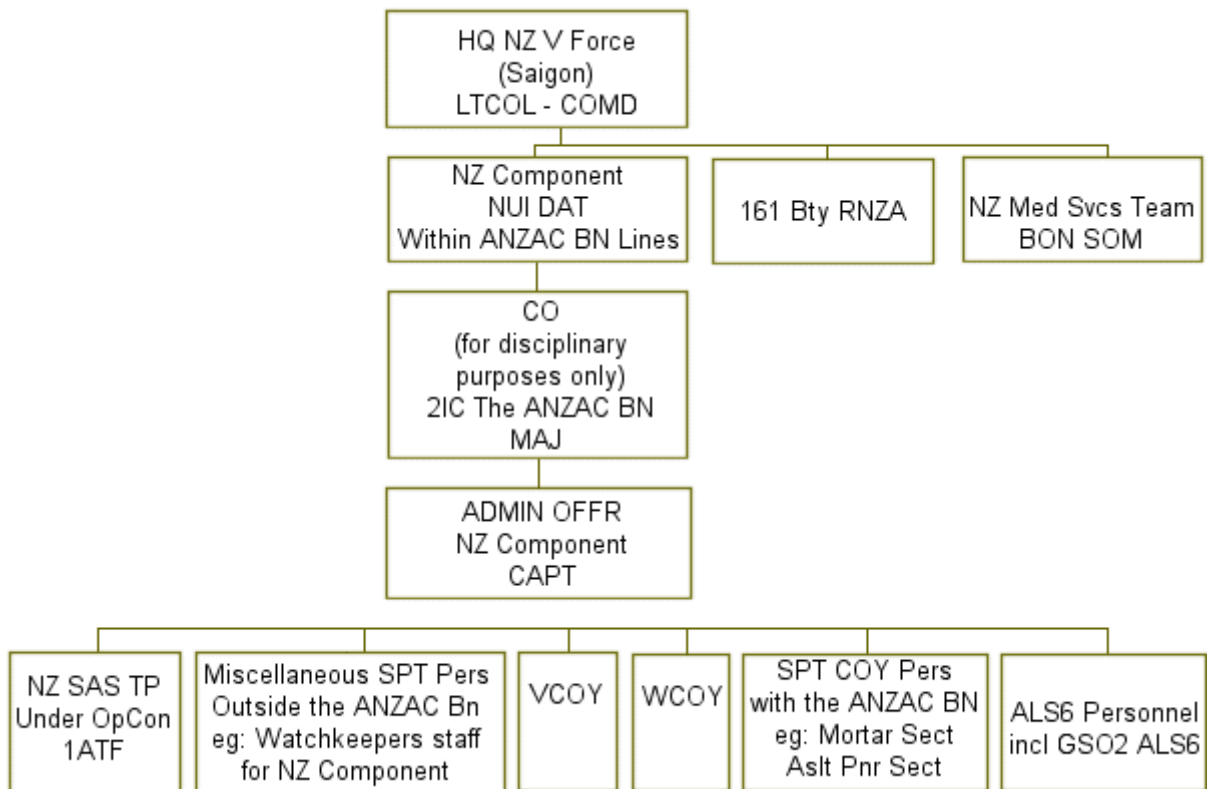
In summary 1RNZIR was a highly-trained, combat-ready unit, well able to fulfil the roles envisaged in the various SEATO contingency plans and, if need be, combat operations in South Vietnam.

### **Increased Troop Levels in South Vietnam**

Following Australia's decision to increase the size of its Task Force in South Vietnam in 1967 the New Zealand Government in turn authorised the deployment of a reinforced Rifle Company to South Vietnam rather than 1RNZIR as a Unit. This reinforced Rifle Company, known as 'Victor One', at a strength of 160 personnel, had in addition to the standard company HQ and three platoons, a Mortar Section, Assault Pioneer Section, a First Reinforcement and a separate administrative element to be known as 'the NZ Component' with the task of managing the personnel administration of all New Zealand personnel in the 1st Australian Task Force (1ATF). The deployment was to be for six months from May 1967 when 'Victor One' would be relieved in November 1967 by 'Victor Two'—also for a six-month tour. In turn 1RNZIR's establishment was reduced from 720 to 560.

In meeting this commitment 1RNZIR drew upon two Rifle Companies to form 'Victor One' and thereafter the remaining two Rifle Companies to form 'Victor Two'. Following the two six-month tours by 'Victor One' and 'Victor Two' it was agreed that to become fully familiar with the terrain, the nature of the operations in South Vietnam, as well as to conform with the tours of duty being undertaken by the Australians, a twelve-month tour would become standard policy.

## New Zealand Force Structure, South Vietnam



**Total: 543 Personnel**

### November 1967-December 1971

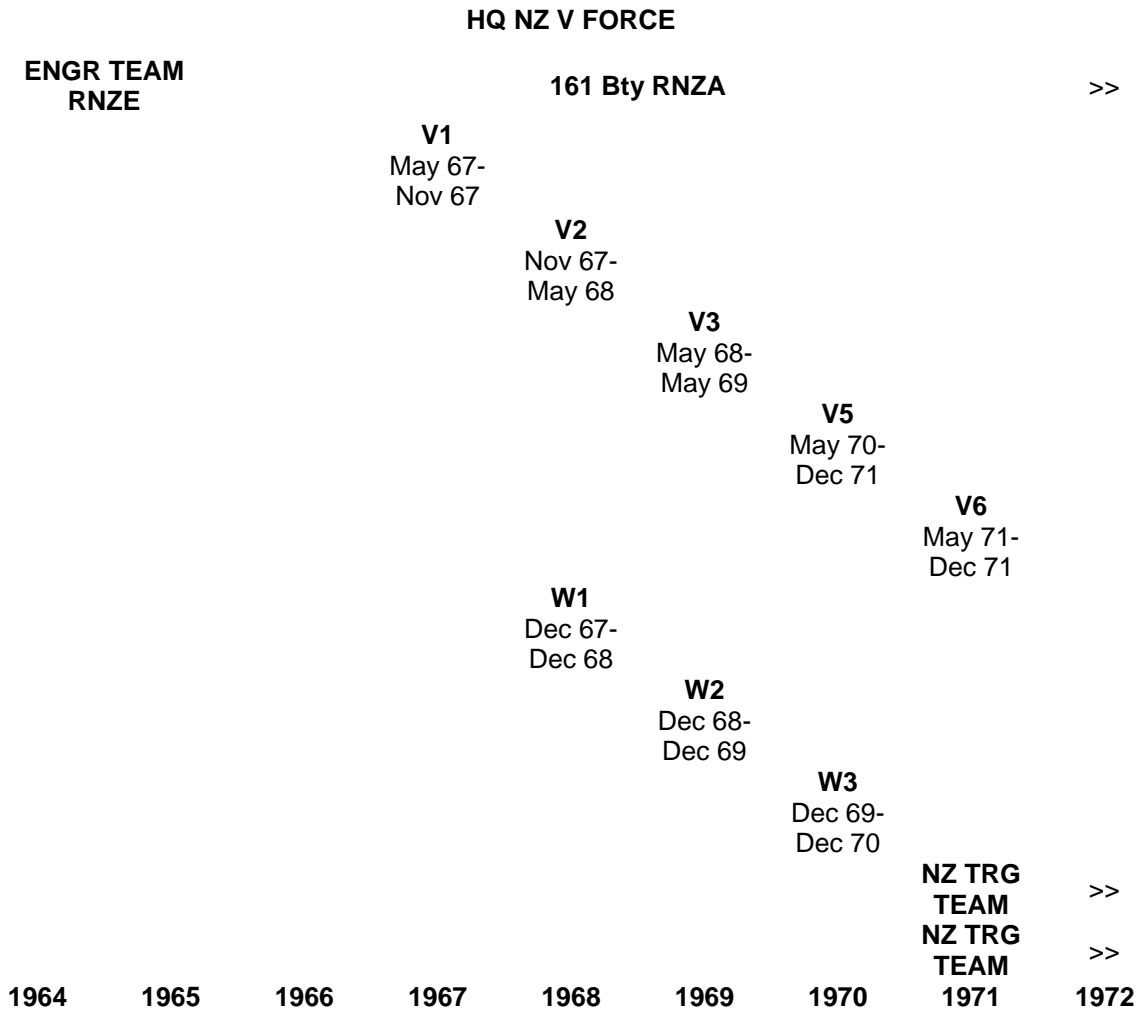
For 1RNZIR the period November 1967-December 1971 was dominated by two events, the British decision to withdraw all their forces from East of Suez by November 1971, and the increased military commitment to South Vietnam.

The first of these events, the British announcement of their impending military withdrawal from the region, confirmed the start of the demise of SEATO, and resulted in a downgrading of the status and priority of SEATO Contingency Plans, which from a New Zealand viewpoint meant the 'combat-ready 1RNZIR' would now be available for deployment to South Vietnam. It also caused the dismemberment of 28 Commonwealth Brigade Group by the withdrawal of all the United Kingdom elements (comprising nearly 50 per cent of the Brigade strength) which, together with the associated decision to vacate Terendak Camp by November 1969, faced Australia and New Zealand with an early decision about the role and future location of their forces in Malaysia.

An increased military commitment to South Vietnam now became possible. The government decision to deploy a second reinforced rifle company led to speculation which at first had the Unit HQ of 1RNZIR going to head up an ANZAC Battalion. Although such a unit was subsequently formed it was not to be commanded from 1RNZIR. Instead, in December 1967 'Whisky One' Company was deployed to join 2RAR in South Vietnam where 'Victor Two' was already serving.

In March 1968 the formal establishment of the ANZAC Battalion made further demands on 1RNZIR's strength as a number of appointments were required to be taken up by unit personnel. The subsequent change to one-year tours for each of the Rifle Companies (which resulted in an adjustment to the relief system from New Zealand) together with the rotation of 1RNZIR's Officers and NCOs through either the ANZAC Battalions, the New Zealand Component, HQ 1st Australian Task Force or the Australian Logistic Support Group (1ALSG), became the focus of the Unit's activities.

## Deployment Schedule: South Vietnam 1964-72



Nevertheless, despite these demands, training associated with this commitment to South Vietnam provided a continuous professional challenge for 1RNZIR. Successive companies undertook extensive training programs which culminated in testing operational exercises designed to assess their preparedness for active service.

The six month overlap arising from the deployment of 'Whisky One' (the second Rifle Company) in December 1967 and 'Victor Three' in May 1968—both for one year tours—this resulted in each ANZAC Battalion thereafter having to cater for a Company 'relief during its tour—and as a consequence a 'veteran' company, having served six months, coming under Command of the next incoming ANZAC Battalion for the balance of its tour. Under the New Zealand Force structure in South Vietnam, the 2ic Anzac Battalion was the Commanding Officer for disciplinary purposes for all New Zealand personnel in 1ATF. The overall strength deployed in theatre represented ten percent of Regular Force strength of the New Zealand Army and at no stage did New Zealand introduce conscription.

## **The Move to Singapore**

By December 1969 28 Comwel Inf Bde Gp had been disbanded and Terendak Garrison handed over to the Malaysian Army. By this time, as agreed by Australia and New Zealand, the remaining ANZAC elements of the now defunct Commonwealth Brigade had been withdrawn to Singapore and relocated at Changi Barracks and Neeson Garrison.

For 1RNZIR this move to Singapore resulted in the unit being quartered away from its principal training areas, and as a consequence much time was to be spent in travelling into Malaysia to reach distant training grounds. Neeson Camp, however, provided excellent Base facilities and in particular had its own rifle ranges (to 600 metres) adjacent to the camp.

## **Withdrawal from South Vietnam**

In 1970 there were further changes in the Vietnam commitment with 'Whisky Three' Company being withdrawn without replacement in November 1970. In its place 1RNZIR was then required to assist in the raising, training and deployment to South Vietnam of the first New Zealand Army training team. This reduced commitment did, however, result in a measure of stability returning to 1RNZIR. The Unit establishment was raised to 560, three rifle companies were re-established and Admin/Sp, Company reverted to separate sub-units.

In May 1971 'Victor Five' returned and was replaced by 'Victor Six'. 1RNZIR moved to its new home in Dieppe Barracks in Sembawang, Singapore, and in November a change of government in the United Kingdom led to a review of the decision by Britain to withdraw from the Far East. Under the auspices of the Five Power Defence Agreement, ANZUK Force HQ with 28 ANZUK Brigade (of which 1RNZIR became part) and 28 Logistic Support Force under command was established with effect from 1 November 1971.

Finally, the withdrawal of 'Victor Six' in December 1971 ended 1RNZIR's involvement in South Vietnam. Altogether six 'Victor' companies and three 'Whisky' companies served in South Vietnam and 29 Officers and men died there. At its peak, in November 1968, New Zealand servicemen, in South Vietnam, for the most part infantry, numbered 543 and a total of 3890 troops, all regulars (although not all infantry) served there between June 1964 and December 1972.

## **Meeting the Challenge—A Retrospective Appraisal**

### *Tactical Orientation*

The period prior to any military commitment to South Vietnam by New Zealand had been a time of intense study into counter-insurgency and unconventional warfare by the New Zealand Army. Doctrinal changes had taken root and all training focused on a limited-type war against a Vietnamese guerrilla and main force enemy. The climax was unquestionably to be South Vietnam, but instead of the expected Battalion commitment, this was restricted primarily to 161 Bty RNZA and two reinforced rifle companies from 1RNZIR, being part of an ANZAC Battalion in 1ATF.

### *The Training Cycle*

At the soldier level getting to South Vietnam was intensely competitive. From enlistment a recruit undertook Basic and Infantry Corps Training over a period of five months. This was followed by a four-week Tropical Warfare course in Fiji and thereafter came intensive platoon and sub-unit training at 1 Bn Depot in Burnham, which also included a wide ranging series of live firing exercises. Not surprisingly, this extensive and comprehensive training period resulted in a high wastage rate arising from general unsuitability of some recruits, medical and physical deficiencies, domestic and personnel problems causing a failure rate which was seldom lower than 40 per cent. In total a recruit could expect to spend up to eight months in training before he became eligible to be sent as a reinforcement to 1RNZIR. Once there he undertook a minimum of a further three months, theatre orientation, sub-unit and unit training before serving in South Vietnam.

### *Integration with the ANZAC Battalions*

Despite the peacetime environment in Malaysia and Singapore the prospect of active service in South Vietnam served to induce the operational imperatives of urgency and realism, which are often hard to reproduce in a peacetime training environment.

The success achieved thereafter in producing fit, well trained and operationally effective rifle companies which were easily able to integrate well within their respective ANZAC Battalions stemmed from the long-standing ANZAC relationship and the New Zealand Army's interoperability with the Australian Army both organisationally and in terms of tactical doctrine.

### *The Officer Relationship*

The similar background, training and experience of the New Zealand Officers selected for 'Victor' and 'Whisky' companies compared favourably with their Australian counterparts and were a significant factor in the successful integration of the companies within the ANZAC Battalions. Virtually all these Officers were either RMC Duntroon or Portsea graduates. They were 'Australian Thinkers'. All the Majors were 'psc' graduates—a number from the Australian command and staff college at Queenscliff. In essence virtually all the officers were 'known to' or 'by' their Australian counterparts—they were friends and contemporaries.

### **Conclusion**

While New Zealand was successful in meeting its two rifle company commitment to the ANZAC Battalion in 1ATF the adoption of this sub-unit deployment policy was not without cost:

- When reduced to an establishment of 400, 1RNZIR became, to all intents and purposes, non-operational and had difficulty in functioning within a formation environment.
- Effectively, 1RNZIR had become an advanced training and reinforcement depot with its prime role being servicing of the ATF commitment.
- Although the integration of each of the 'Victor' and 'Whisky' companies into their respective ANZAC battalions was invariably successful, there was at that time disappointment that New Zealand's contribution was limited by the manpower resources of a small standing army, and as a consequence, was for a number of reasons (not least political expediency), unable to field and thereafter sustain a nationally identifiable contribution at Unit or Battalion level.
- It remains an inescapable fact, however, that the small Regular New Zealand Army was, and certainly since the end of the Second World War, always had been, 'a sub-critical mass', having at that time only one regular battalion on the ground.

In order therefore to address this limitation and give a perspective to the military value of New Zealand's infantry contribution to the Vietnam War, a comment made by Brigadier RI Thorpe (himself a 2ic of 2RAR/NZ Battalion) has a certain relevance when considering the reality of the New Zealand Army being a 'sub-critical mass';

If there is one element in the New Zealand military ethos that is worth emphasis. it is, to me, the attitude that, in the international field where we have always served and planned to serve, we are always a small increment in a larger force, and therefore can only make our mark through quality—and I think that amongst regulars there has been the recognition that quality does not fall like manna on the chosen but results from serious study and hard training.

## Postscript

In a subsequent review of the New Zealand Army's involvement in the Vietnam War it was concluded that 'never again' would the Army allow itself to be committed to operations at less than unit level. It is pleasing to note that this decision has been reflected in New Zealand's current involvement in East Timor.

## Endnotes

This essay draws on the following sources:

- Roberto Rabel, 'Vietnam and the collapse of the foreign policy consensus', in Malcolm McKinnon, *New Zealand in World Affairs*, vol II, 1957-1972 (Wellington, New Zealand Institute of International Affairs, 1991)
- *The First Battalion Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment Journal*, 25th Anniversary Commemorative Edition
- Correspondence with Brigadier R M Gurr OBE, Comd 28 Comwel Inf Bde Gp and 28 ANZAC Brigade, and interviews with:
  - Major General B Meldrum CB OBE, Dep Comd V Force 1971-72
  - Brigadier RTV Taylor MBE, 2ic 4RAR/ANZAC Battalion 1969-70
  - Lieutenant Colonel JD McGuire, OC 'Victor 5' Company, 1970-71
  - Lieutenant Colonel M N Ritchie, Admin Officer NZ Component 1970-71
- Access to correspondence between Brigadier R V Taylor and Dr CJ Pugsley, Department of War Studies, The Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst
- My own experience during the period as:
  - BM 28 Comwel Inf Bde Gp, October 1965-January 1968
  - CO 1 Bn Depot, Burnham, New Zealand, December 1968-October 1969
  - CO 1RNZIR, Singapore, November 1969-December 1971
  - ACDS Ops/Plans and as a member of the ad hoc ANZUS Staff Planning Committee, August 1979- December 1981.