

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

## ***THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY TRAINING TEAM VIETNAM***

**John Hartley**

The Australian Army Training Team Vietnam was a unique contribution to Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War. Indeed there had never been another unit like it, and it is doubtful that there will ever be one again. This essay describes how it came about and what it did, and tries to make an assessment of what it achieved.

During 1962 the number of American advisors deployed in South Vietnam grew from 1000 to over 11,000. At the same time the US sought to have troops from other countries join them, not so much for the military assistance they could provide but for the political support that their presence would demonstrate. In May, the Commander-in-Chief Pacific, in a visit to Australia, informed the Chiefs of Staff of a specific proposal for an Australian contribution. Admiral Harry D Felt believed it would be based on individuals or small groups serving with infantry battalions or as instructors. Discussions had already taken place between Washington, Saigon and Canberra, and it was quickly agreed that Australian military assistance should take the form of training in jungle techniques. On 24 May, the Minister for Defence announced that Australia would commit up to 30 military instructors to provide instruction in jungle warfare techniques, village defence and related activities such as engineering and communications. Their role was to 'assist in training the ground forces of South Vietnam'. The contingent was to be commanded by Colonel FP Serong.

Considerable discussion took place as to where the contingent would deploy. The preferred Vietnamese option was to have all the Australians centred on one establishment, namely an old French walled camp on the outskirts of Quang Ngai. The American commander preferred to see Australians filling American billets throughout Vietnam. The eventual outcome that Colonel Serong proposed was for the Team to be divided into a number of identifiable groups to operate within the American advisory structure.

Three groups would be located in I Corps which consisted of the five northern provinces and one group would be located immediately south in II Corps. This initial disposition would shape the concentration of the Team for the next eight years. The type and scope of training varied however. One group was responsible for training regular soldiers, another for training regional troops for operations within a province and a third for training village defenders, border forces and trail watchers. This last group trained forces, which were recruited and paid by a US organisation, code-named the Combined Studies Division (CSD), which was a para-military wing of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The fourth group, located in II Corps, was based at the Ranger Training Centre that specialised in jungle, mountain and swamp training.

The selection and preparation of the first contingent set the pattern which, with some variations, would be followed throughout the war. Team members assembled at the Intelligence Centre, initially located at Mosman, Sydney, where they were briefed on a range of topics which related to counter-insurgency operations in Indochina. Maoist theory, Viet Cong methods and the lessons from the French defeat were studied. Later contingents would do three weeks of colloquial language training. Following training at the Intelligence Centre, the contingent was sent to the Jungle Training Centre at Canungra where members were put through a series of field exercises: navigation, harbouring, ambush and counter-ambush, patrolling and shooting. This was also a chance to become fit and to relearn the lessons of living in the jungle. It was also the opportunity to learn instructional techniques and three training methods, in particular, that would surface regularly in Vietnam: sneaker ranges, shooting galleries and the use of demonstration platoons.

On the 12 July, while still at Canungra, members were told that their recently given title, Australian Army Component—Vietnam, would change to Australian Army Training Team Vietnam. It appeared that the departments of Defence and External Affairs felt that

'Component' somehow reduced the notion of an Australian identity. 'Training' was added to emphasise that the Team was not to be involved in operational tasks. The absurdity of this notion would soon be made plain.

The Team left by QANTAS from Mascot on 29 July 1962. They were farewelled by a small, lonely, anxious group of families and friends. Australia's entry into the Vietnam War was barely noticed by the media or the public.

The first contingent soon settled into its training routines. Many were surprised by the often-displayed ineptitude of infantry battalions, including those with considerable combat experience. Marksmanship was poor, weapons were badly maintained, security at the halt and on the move was rarely practised, fire and movement was unheard of and the night was given over to campfires for the cooking of chickens which had been taken from villages and carried alive all day. Real improvements took time. Introducing an innovation from Canungra or from their Malayan experience was a slow process. Not only had the Vietnamese camp hierarchy to be convinced but also the American advisor who had very often-developed training plans in English and Vietnamese. And while the Vietnamese appeared to take quite readily to new ideas once they were approved, there was always the sense that once back in operational situations, the lessons would be forgotten.

The advisors found themselves in an anomalous position because they had been directed not to become involved in operations. To do their job properly they felt they had to accompany units on operations in the same way that their American counterparts did. It would take two years of lobbying before this would change. In the meantime, advisors were increasingly deployed as observers. One early such deployment involved Captain Adrian Clunies-Ross. He accompanied a ranger battalion and is reported to have found the experience somewhat unnerving. The battalion deployed by helicopter—a reasonably new experience. The helicopters were lined up on the ground, each having been crowded by about eleven or twelve slightly built soldiers. As the rotors began to turn, Clunies-Ross saw a Vietnamese soldier try unsuccessfully to get into the first three helicopters before finally scrambling aboard his own. Subsequently he found out it was the battalion commander who was almost left behind.

Advisors soon appreciated the quagmire that characterised Vietnamese politics. No one could remain immune. The outcomes of coup and counter-coup soon pervaded all levels of involvement. And nowhere was this more obvious than in the central highlands where the CIA's Central Studies Division was attempting to mobilise Montagnard groups to counter increasing Viet Cong influence.

Captain Barry Petersen, a veteran of the Malayan anti-terrorist campaign, was tasked to supervise and develop Montagnard paramilitary groups in the central highlands based on Ban Me Thout. He established a special relationship with the Rhade and H'mong tribes, learning their language and eventually gaining their trust to such an extent that they bestowed upon him the honour of a tribal chief.

Through skill, courage and determination, Petersen was able to raise, train and lead a force of over 1000 Montagnards who wrought havoc on the Viet Cong, inflicting heavy casualties and generally disrupting infiltration and, more importantly, restricting their ability to extend their influence within the Montagnards. His task, however, was made almost impossible by the resentment and distrust that the Montagnards generally had for the Vietnamese from whom they wanted independence. In September 1964, in a sudden flare up, a number of South Vietnamese special forces were killed and many disarmed. Petersen, through skilful diplomacy, and because he had gained the trust of so many tribal elders, was able to achieve a peaceful solution. But his very success raised Vietnamese suspicions and he was eventually required to leave the country.

By mid 1964 a new era began unfolding. It was becoming obvious that the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) was not able to defeat the Viet Cong. The Team was increased to 83 advisors and they would now be employed in the field in advisor teams at battalion and lower

levels. Typically, a battalion team consisted of a captain, a lieutenant and two sergeant specialists. Warrant officers from the Training Team replaced the lieutenant. Tasks varied but generally included advice to the battalion and company commanders concerning operational planning, the provision of US air, artillery and helicopter support and advice on logistics and training. Advisors also reported on the standard of their unit and thus provided an independent assessment from that of the Vietnamese. In 1967 armoured and artillery corps warrant officers were attached to cavalry and artillery units.

Vietnamese battalions were smaller than their Australian counterparts, often numbering less than 400 men. Frequently commanded by a captain, they were tightly controlled with the lowest manoeuvre element being a company. In the early years, operations were usually limited to a few days and little ground was covered.

The average soldier was about 19 years of age, slightly built but capable of great endurance. Education was good by prevailing standards, their needs simple and their humour infectious. Leadership, certainly up to the period of the Tet Offensive in 1968, was poor. Officers were selected by a system that emphasised education and the officer who siphoned off funds, intended to buy rations for his troops, was not uncommon. Such corruption, however, was partly a product of custom and of pitifully low rates of pay in a country with an alarming rate of inflation.

Giving advice was a delicate function. Sometimes it was offered by example, at other times it was broached directly with the commander. Confidence and rapport had to be established with a Vietnamese counterpart. Timing was important; there was little to be gained by giving advice during a contact or firefight. Much depended on the personality and experience of both parties.

Advisors were also posted to sectors—to the provinces and districts—where for the first time they were responsible to province and district senior advisors for military matters. Their duties included accompanying Regional Forces on operations and training these forces as well as the village-based Popular Forces, overseeing security arrangements and providing liaison with ARVN and subsequently US forces that might be operating in the province. Although it was not intended, advisors inevitably became involved in civilian affairs, including rice control, population control measures such as curfews and roadblocks, and other security measures.

A regular association also started with the United States Special Forces. Colonel Serong sought to reduce the number of advisors in training camps and to rotate advisors so they might also serve in special forces' detachments. In mid 1964, a Special Forces camp for about 400 soldiers was built in central Quang Nam Province. Two Australian advisors were posted there. The camp was initially supplied by aerial delivery. One live cow, which had been dispatched with two parachutes, landed safely with a pair of US parachute wings stamped on its rump. A few days later a heavy D6 bulldozer was to be used to clear an airstrip, which would mean a considerable improvement to the life of the outpost and was thus eagerly anticipated. The C130 flying direct from Okinawa duly appeared and after several passes dropped the dozer, attached to eight parachutes, into the jungle some 800 meters away. 'Sorry about that', radioed the pilot as the aircraft headed back towards Okinawa.

Disappointment was short lived as half the occupants, including Warrant Officer Collinson of the Royal Australian Engineers, rushed to retrieve the dozer, as did a group of Viet Cong. Everyone was very excited. The bulldozer was found to be cratered and stuck in the mud of a swamp. Shots from the Viet Cong pinged against the metal as Collinson climbed aboard and with help unhooked the parachutes and broke away the crate. He then started the engine and, using the blade, worked the machine out of the mud. Amid considerable shouting and confusion, a system gradually evolved. The Vietnamese with the other Australian advisor formed a protective ring around the bulldozer, with an American sergeant in front to check the route, Collinson—seemingly oblivious to the bullets which cracked around him—crashed through the jungle until he reached the camp some eight hours after the dozer was dropped. Nine of the force were wounded. Collinson, the hero of the moment, began grading the airstrip fifteen minutes later.

The strength of the Team fluctuated. Although authorised at 100 (fifteen officers and 85 warrant officers), the Team was in the early days invariably about ten per cent under strength, and it was only in 1968 that its complete strength was consistently met. The inability of the posting system to meet the full strength was a constant source of embarrassment to various commanders as the Americans were forced to find the shortfall. Until mid 1970, when the authorised strength of the Team was substantially increased, the only major change to its deployment was the move into advisory positions within the Territorial Forces in the Delta in November 1968. The increase from June 1970 saw the Team continue its obligations in the northern provinces as well as the Delta but also allowed for expansion into Phuoc Tuy Province. It peaked at 227 men which included 78 corporals. This allowed for the establishment of a number of Mobile Advisory Training Teams, which were based on two warrant officers and four corporals who included a sapper and a medic.

Task Force commanders had been attempting for some time to have more Australian advisors in the province. Their argument was based on the idea that if Australian advisors were to replace American advisors then they could exert more pressure on the Vietnamese in Phuoc Tuy. This would place the Australian commander in a more powerful position in relation to furthering the counter insurgency effort in the province. Australian advisors could be expected to follow similar battle procedures to the Task Force and thus facilitate operations between the Task Force and local territorial forces. Finally, although not stated, the captain and warrant officer advisors, by virtue of their rank and nationality, regardless of the organisation to which they belonged, would automatically be in a subordinate position in a way that American advisors would never be.

Team commanders invariably resisted pressures to concentrate in the province. They pointed out that the Team was firmly entrenched in the American advisory structure, especially in I Corps. Here they exercised considerable influence, relative to their size, not only in the 1st and 2nd Divisions but also in the training centres, in Special Forces and in the CSD. They were demonstrating a national presence on a broader basis than could be achieved by the Task Force. They were also gaining a level of experience not likely to be available to them in Phuoc Tuy. Their spread also meant that the Department of Defence was gaining information of war in Vietnam generally which would not have been available otherwise. Finally, both the Vietnamese and the Americans argued for the retention of the Team wherever it was deployed. Indeed more advisors were sought, not fewer.

A second objection was based on the expectations of Task Force commanders concerning the ability of advisors to influence their counterpart Vietnamese officers. The loyalty of advisors was to the Vietnamese and the province senior advisor. They took their orders from the senior advisor and could only hope to influence the Vietnamese if parallel orders were issued through the Vietnamese chain of command. The advisor had to try to understand the Vietnamese problems and to help them achieve agreed outcomes within the limitations that confronted them. Problems and solutions seen by a highly trained, well equipped and supported Task Force, in a foreign country, whose soldiers only fought the war for one year, and who did not have families or a social structure to consider, could be quite different from the problems and solutions as they appeared to the Vietnamese. If the advisor was seen by the Vietnamese to be controlled by the Task Force, he could have his credibility questioned and thus no longer be of use as an advisor.

Before 1970, the Team numbered about ten to fifteen advisors in Phuoc Tuy Province. It was ironic, that as the Task Force began to withdraw, the Team built up until the whole of the Team concentrated in the province just as the Task Force departed.

So what impact did the Team have? This is a difficult judgement. In I Corps, for instance, with some exceptions, the ARVN had attained a level of confidence where advice, certainly at unit and sub-unit level, was no longer necessary. But equally, combined operations were becoming increasingly complex and advisors found themselves involved more and more in liaison type duties. There is little doubt that advisors had a positive impact on many Vietnamese commanders and especially on the minor tactics that were the hallmark of our own performance.

In the Territorial Forces, and the Regional Forces in particular, our warrant officers were especially suited. Their environment was the rifle company which they knew well. They were seasoned man-managers and knew how to get things done. Unfortunately they could not be spared from other duties until mid-1970 by which time it was probably too late. They did, however, make a notable contribution in the Delta where their sound military knowledge, freshness of approach and skill in minor tactics paid dividends.

Service with special forces added a further dimension. They were accepted on equal terms by the elite units of the US Army. In the lonely outposts, on long patrols and accompanied by soldiers who were not even accorded the status of citizens, and all the time isolated from the reassuring support of their countrymen, they performed with distinction.

Veterans of the Team express two deep-felt concerns or regrets. The first concern relates to the wide variation in resolve and performance within the units they were supporting. Suspicion, divided loyalties and self-interest resulted in a jumble of organisations, fragmented effort and a grossly unequal sharing of sacrifice. Despite exemplary performance by some units, and a genuine opposition by many in the South to any form of communism, it seemed to many of us that the South Vietnamese would never come to grips with the war they were fighting. In part this was the result of the lack of widespread appeal of the Vietnamese government when compared with the revolutionary fervour of the other side. Another may have been the self-defeating influence and presence of allied forces which appeared to many to have replaced the French. Other reasons probably included the favouring of Catholics, the corruption of leaders, the inefficiency of many officers and the effectiveness of the enemy. While war weariness and casualties were offered as reasons, the other side suffered similarly but did not reduce their resolve.

The regret, indeed tragedy, was the apparent abandonment of the South Vietnamese by the allied withdrawal. Although the South's forces were more capable in 1969 than they had been seven years earlier, their foe was also stronger. The haste of the withdrawal and the inability of the South to fill the gaps, particularly once America withdrew its guaranteed air support, represented a major blow to those advisors who saw their former units submerged in the eventual debacle.

The natural tendency of the Training Team was to stress individual skills, small unit activities, patrolling and night operations. Although small in numbers, they represented a major investment, containing enough officers almost to man a battalion and the full warrant officer complement of the nine-infantry battalions of a division. Of the 990 who deployed, 33 were killed and 122 wounded. The Team was highly decorated: 113 Imperial honours were awarded, including four Victoria Crosses as well as 245 American and 369 Vietnamese awards. The Team also received the US Army's Meritorious Unit Commendation and the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Palm Unit Citation. The Australian Army Training Team Vietnam did all that was asked of it and much more than anyone expected. The range of its experience stands alone in Australian military history.