

THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY AND THE VIETNAM WAR 1962-1972

THE ROLE AND IMPACT OF CIVIL AFFAIRS IN SOUTH VIETNAM 1965-1971

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Introduction

While this essay will focus on the role and activities of the 1st Australian Civil Affairs Unit in Phuoc Tuy Province in South Vietnam, it is important to understand that the Civil Affairs Unit's activities occurred within a context wider than just a single Australian Army unit. During the 1960s and early 1970s, civic action projects were undertaken on an ever-increasing scale throughout South Vietnam by Australian, US and other countries' armed forces.¹ In the Australian context, the 1st Australian Civil Affairs Unit was not the first Australian Army Unit to conduct civic action projects in South Vietnam, or in Phuoc Tuy Province where the Unit was located, nor was it the only Australian services unit to perform civic action projects after it arrived in South Vietnam in June 1967.² But when pacification became a strategic Australian Army goal following US Government policy,³ the Civil Affairs Unit held the formal responsibility for coordinating civic action projects in South Vietnam as well as conducting the majority of individual civic action projects.

Terminology

This essay is titled 'Civil Affairs'. In the military context, the term 'civic action' is described thus:

The purpose of military civic action program is to utilise armed forces' resources for constructive civilian activities such as assisting in health, welfare, and public works projects, improving living conditions, alleviating suffering and improving the economic base of the country. In addition, the program seeks to gain the support, loyalty and respect of the people for the armed forces and to emphasise the concept of freedom and worth of the individual.⁴

The term 'civil affairs' can be thought of as being armed forces involved in the running of civil administration: 'Civil Affairs' is concerned with the relationship between the armed forces, the local authorities and the people, with particular reference to areas where armed forces personnel are stationed or conducting operations. This relationship, depending on Government policy, may vary from liaison, advice and assistance to the local civil government to the exercise of complete legislative, executive and judicial power by the armed forces. The civil affairs policy for each area of operations should be established at the highest national level.⁵

Supreme command of Phuoc Tuy Province in South Vietnam was vested in an Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) officer (Lieutenant Colonel) who directed the operations of all Vietnamese military forces in the province as well as all civilian administration. The Australian Civil Affairs Unit's major efforts were on civic action projects, with lesser involvement in civil affairs. There were direct links between Civil Affairs Unit members and their counterpart local Vietnamese administration officials, but in terms of the definition of 'civil affairs' the Civil Affairs Unit's involvement was limited to some personnel holding positions as advisors on the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) organisation which carried the formal responsibility in the province of advising the Vietnamese Government on administration matters.

Beginnings of Civic Action by the Australian Army

In 1965, members of 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR), were conducting small numbers of civic action projects in Bien Hoa Province, and Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV) members were performing one-off projects at various locations around South Vietnam, wherever they happened to be located.

When 1ATF was established at Nui Dat in mid-1966, a nucleus group of ex-AATTV members formed informally under Captain Bob Rooney and began carrying out civic action-type projects to assist the local population. Rooney was succeeded by the energetic and flamboyant Major John Donohoe, the self-styled 'Man from WHAM' ('Winning Hearts and Minds'). The group operated beside the US Army's 14th AA Platoon, 2nd Civil Affairs Company, which was in Phuoc Tuy Province when 1ATF was established at Nui Dat.⁶ This US Platoon stayed in Phuoc Tuy for about another eighteen months although there was never any formal command or activity links between the US and Australian units.⁷

1st Australian Civil Affairs Unit

The 1st Australian Civil Affairs Unit was raised at Middle Head, Sydney, in April 1967, and moved to Nui Dat in South Vietnam in June 1967; it remained in Vietnam until November 1971. On the Order of Battle, it was a Headquarters Australian Force Vietnam (HQ AFV) unit and not a 1ATF unit. Civil Affairs' Commanding Officer (CO) had direct access to Commander Australian Force Vietnam (COMAFV) and, on operational matters, worked closely with Commander 1ATF. It was funded by South East Asia Treaty Organisation funds through the then Department of External Affairs; and it had no interaction, formal or otherwise, with US Civil Affairs personnel. Civil Affairs CO reported the unit's activities monthly to II Field Force (US), and provided weekly reports to (CORDS) in Baria but there was no feedback received and no formal tasking or alignment of policies or activities, despite the ongoing presence of a small number of US civil affairs personnel in Phuoc Tuy,⁸ nor was there any delineation of formal responsibility for civic action projects in the province.⁹

Changed Role and Structure Over Time

Between 1967 and 1971 changes occurred in the Civil Affairs Unit's role and structure. From its arrival in mid 1967, the Unit had had close involvement in Task Force military operations, particularly assistance with crowd management and liaison with local officials during cordon and search operations. Another example was the creation of a new village called Suoi Nghe beside Route 2 north of the Task Force base. While not popular with the local populace who were required to move there, the establishment of Suoi Nghe was for security reasons, to allow the relocation of Vietnamese civilians from the area in the north of the Province known as Slope 30.

With the improvement over time in the province security situation, and with the increased emphasis on pacification which developed after the US created its CORDS organisation in 1967, the Civil Affairs Unit's activity focus moved quickly to greater numbers of, and in many cases larger and longer-term, civic action projects by the Unit itself, and the coordination of civic action projects by other Task Force and non-Task Force units.

Pacification as a concept and practice in Vietnam had been around in a small and fairly ineffective way for about twenty years and so was not a concept developed by the US for Vietnam. Australia had recent and direct experience from Malaya and Borneo of a successful pacification program. It can be described as shielding populated areas with troops, pacifying these areas by earning the trust and loyalty of the people, then pushing out their boundaries until ultimately support and recruitment bases for enemy forces were gone. While pacification had been part of US operations before 1967, Westmoreland had opposed expanding pacification activities when this was suggested in the US in 1965 because of his view that the war could be won by attrition. Other political forces in Washington prevailed, and emphasis on pacification increased significantly with the establishment of CORDS.¹⁰ Australia's emphasis changed accordingly.

One could speculate that Westmoreland's attitude to pacification was mirrored by at least some Commanding Officers of 1ATF units who were reluctant to provide troops to work on civic action projects because they felt their own operations to be of higher priority. While at the one level this is perhaps understandable, at another it is not. One could ask why these COs were not briefed, or briefed more convincingly, about the emphasis on pacification either before leaving Australia or while in Vietnam? Indeed, their own experiences might have been expected to show them how effective pacification could be.

But 1ATF's emphasis increased nevertheless. The Commander of 1ATF in 1969-70, Brigadier SP Weir, was firm in requiring 1ATF units to increase the resources they put into civic action projects. A successful example is the two-room school built by 5RAR in the hamlet of Ong Trinh on Route 15 in 1969-70.¹¹

Aims of Civic Action

Civic action had long-term political and military objectives. Its primary aim was to win the support of the South Vietnamese people for their government in Saigon; a subsidiary aim from the Australian viewpoint was to obtain goodwill towards Australian forces in SVN and Australia generally.

While it is not unusual for Australian service units to undertake projects which benefit the local populace, civic action in South Vietnam had little to do with altruism and much to do with politics and securing the military objective of defeating the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese army in South Vietnam.

Principles of Civic Action

Civic action was based on a number of underlying principles, calculated to achieve maximum impact on the civilian population:¹²

- A project originated by the local people and then adopted by the armed forces is much more desirable, and has a much greater chance of success than one developed elsewhere, even though the latter seems obviously superior to an outsider.¹³
- A project must have a fairly short completion time or have phases that provide frequent opportunities to evaluate its effectiveness.
- Results should be observable, measurable or tangible. They should also lend themselves to publicity designed to inspire emulation by other military units.
- Results should make visible to the public eye the benefits that spring out of an association of the military authority and civil government. Credit for results should be attributed to both the local military and the local civil administration.
- Each project should be initiated in the name of the Ministry having jurisdiction over the particular function, assisted by local military units or persons

1st Civil Affairs Unit Structure

Headed by officers at Lieutenant Colonel rank, the Unit consisted of a headquarters/administration group plus operational detachments with specific responsibilities:

Engineer Detachment

- typically constructed market places, windmills (fourteen were constructed in all), school rooms, market buildings, fences, medical dispensaries;
- two major projects, one each at the beginning and end of the Civil Affairs Unit's presence in South Vietnam were the establishment of Suoi Nghe village, starting late 1967, and Project 399 at the end of the Task Force's existence in Phuoc Tuy Province which was the construction of 600 houses for Regional and Popular Force soldiers around the Province.

Medical Detachment

- heavily involved in operations known as Medical Civil Aid Programs (MEDCAPS), conducted daily in provincial villages;
- by 1969, MEDCAPS were incorporated into what were called Integrated Civil Aid Programs (ICAPS), conducted several nights per week, when a medical team would stay overnight in a village and treat anyone who turned up for treatment. A movie screen would be erected nearby and those in the queue for treatment, and other villagers, would watch the films. Often, a whole of a village would turn out to either watch proceedings or to obtain medical treatment. Not surprisingly, they watched films chosen because of their themes which promoted South Vietnam at the expense of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces;
- major programs like the cleft palate program—identifying people with cleft palates and arranging two-stage corrective surgery;
- Dental Civil Aid Programs (DENTCAPS) carried out by units other than Civil Affairs.

The Civil Affairs Medical Detachment coordinated all MEDCAPS and DENTCAPS conducted by 1ATF units. The Medical Detachment's head was also the Province CORDS advisor on medical matters.

Education Detachment

- typically advised on where new schools could be built, provided educational supplies and library books to village schools, and conducted English language classes, which were very popular;
- during 1969-70 when Civil Affairs was under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Peter Gratton, the Education Detachment also became responsible for youth and sports activities in Phuoc Tuy. At this time, the Education Detachment OIC was also the Province CORDS advisor on Education, and the Detachment's 2IC was the Province CORDS advisor on youth and sports matters;
- ran a scout group for local Vietnamese youths.

Liaison Detachment

- consisted of Vietnamese-speaking Australian officers who were graduates of the RAAF School of Languages in Victoria;
- responsibility was to be out and about every day talking and listening to the civilian population, assessing where projects might be warranted, preparing feasibility studies, and generally developing close contacts at village level;
- widely known and accepted by local Vietnamese and spent most of their time in local villages;
- delivered mail from VC prisoners of war incarcerated around the country to the prisoners' families in Phuoc Tuy, and collected mail and gifts from the families for the prisoners and which were eventually delivered them to the prisoners;
- supervised food and commodity distributions, for example, after the Battle of Binh Ba in early June 1967;
- gave Vietnamese language presentations to former Viet Cong (VC) and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) personnel who defected to the south under the Chieu Hoi (Open Arms) program (defectors were known as 'Hoi Chanh'), and delivered solatium payments to local Vietnamese families when these compensation payments were decided upon;¹⁴
- provided interpreting services when visitors to the Task Force required an Australian interpreter. For example, politicians and journalists visiting from Australia often preferred Australian interpreters to both guide them around the province and do their interpreting.

Agricultural Detachment

- advised on, and provided supplies for, projects such as rice, sorghum and other crop growing;
- responsible for animal husbandry projects when these developed from about 1969 onwards. A typical project would be to supply the means including animals for local civilians to start their own chicken or pig farms.

Vung Tau

A small Civil Affairs section was established at Vung Tau. It consisted of a Liaison Officer and interpreter and operated mostly on contract labour.

Other units' involvement

Other units to make significant contributions to civic action programs included 1 Field and 17 Construction Squadrons, Royal Australian Engineers, and 1 Psychological Operations Unit.

Expanded role

By 1969, the CO Civil Affairs was responsible for co-ordination of all military civic action by Australian troops in Vietnam, including Vung Tau and Phan Rang where the RAAF had units, and Saigon. The major focus of civic action efforts remained Phuoc Tuy.

Wind-down period

In February 1971, when the Australian Army had over four years' experience in the conduct of civic action, Civil Affairs CO Lieutenant Colonel KP Outridge wrote his end-of-posting report. In it, he observed that while there were numerous examples of successful civic action projects, there were also failures, with consequent lessons to be learned:

The most apparent danger in the Military Civic Action field is a too aggressive Australian involvement in Vietnamese affairs. There is a tendency for Australians, being certain of their own 'excellence', to exercise an aggressive policemen'ship and push Australian type 'solutions' to correct a Vietnamese 'muddle'. Australians generally are inclined to ignore the environment from both the cultural and economic point of view. Neither cultural change nor improvement in economic environment can be achieved in the short term; this aspect is particularly important when one considers the uncertainty of duration of Military Civic Action involvement in an area.¹⁵

Examples of failings were:

- apathy by local administration officials towards projects;
- 1ATF generosity in school maintenance had led to local Parents and Citizens committees' disinterest towards their own involvement in school maintenance. This was a classic example of an outcome if the local population was not sufficiently involved in projects;
- past over-involvement by Australia in medical aid projects, which did not lead to encouraging Vietnamese self-reliance. (When this was recognised, a program of progressive Australian withdrawal had been implemented to increase Vietnamese self-reliance with tangible, positive results.);
- lack of training on project maintenance, leading again to over-reliance on Australian personnel and to mechanical breakdowns, eg, windmills.

Outridge identified a number of solutions:

- local officials had to have major involvement in identifying and approving projects within local administrative systems;
- related to the above point, a means needed to be found to get local officials to take a leading role in project design, contract letting and supervision of contractors;
- provision of local funds for projects as an indication of the depth of local interest;
- all requests for projects to be handled through the normal province administrative system; concurrence at province level by itself was insufficient;
- delays in deciding whether to adopt projects were acceptable as they provided the opportunity to gauge the depth of local interest;
- once a project had been accepted, there should be no procrastination in its execution.

The common thread of many of Outridge's conclusions was that the natural enthusiasm of Australian personnel to help a group less fortunate than themselves had resulted in over-reliance by the Vietnamese on Australian support and action, an over-reliance characterised variously by apathy, inaction, sometimes greed and an inability to maintain mechanical items.

Enemy Contact

When 1ATF arrived in Phuoc Tuy Province in mid-1966, the military security situation was poor. Most roads could not be travelled by single vehicles, and some required fully escorted convoys before they could be traversed.

By 1969-70, this situation was much improved. Although by the nature of their operations Civil Affairs staff were vulnerable to enemy action should the VC have wanted to do so, overall there was little hostile action against Civil Affairs personnel. There were minor incidents including an ambush in Hoi My village when Civil Affairs personnel sustained gunshot wounds, but overall there were no fatalities or serious wounds.

Attacks against Civil Affairs projects were rare. The VC damaged the water reticulation system on Long Son Island, just days after the system came into operation, but this type of incident was the exception and not the rule.

In 1990, during interviews with a number of former senior Viet Cong officers, I asked the then Chairman of the Peoples' Committee in Vung Tau, Mr Nguyen Minh Ninh, who advised that he had been the deputy commander of D445 battalion at the battle of Long Tan, why the VC did not target Civil Affairs unit members and projects when such targeting would not have been difficult. He replied that from the VC viewpoint, the projects were helping the local population. They were public works and so the VC left them alone. Having said that, Mr Nguyen showed little knowledge of Australian civic action, explaining that his was a 'soldiers' unit and civic action was something to be handled by local (VC) forces.¹⁶

Effectiveness of Civic Action

The key question in regard to civic action is how effective was it in achieving its goals of winning the support of the local population for the Saigon regime, and winning good will towards Australia.

Vietnamese villagers obviously had to decide how to demonstrate political loyalties from the perspective of their circumstances, which might typically be a mixture of the following and which might differ between villages:

- historical loyalties; eg, to the Viet Minh, and whether these carried through to this conflict;
- traditional approach and loyalties of their village; for example, Hoa Long village was regarded as being pro Viet Cong;

- may have had close, even direct family links with the VC, the ARVN or both;
- trying to make a living, and to raise and educate children;
- trying to keep their family safe from the war surrounding them, particularly when the security situation in many villages saw a strong ARVN/US/Australian presence during the day but not the same degree of security at night;
- powerless to have any real impact on political or military events;
- aware that the local administration, both civilian and military, was corrupt and inefficient and not able to provide protection.

Other influencing factors were the Phoenix program (targetted assassination of members of the Viet Cong Infrastructure) which at times destroyed goodwill as did aspects of the solatium practices which were not always well received.

In these circumstances, and recognising Outridge's conclusions referred to above, one could not conclude that civic action by Australian forces by itself caused any change in popular support for either local ARVN forces or the Saigon political regime. Former Unit CO Peter Gratton believed from the outset that in the environment the Australian Army found itself operating in, the primary goal of winning support for the ARVN and local and Saigon governments was incapable of achievement.¹⁷

In terms of the secondary goal of achieving good will towards Australia, it would be safe to conclude that this was achieved although civic action may not have been the sole contributing factor here. In 1968, former Civil Affairs Commanding Officer John McDonagh noted that the policy of restricting recreational access by Australian troops to local villages, and the good standards of behaviour shown by those troops who did enter villages was a contributing factor to attitudes towards Australia.¹⁸ Positive reactions to Australian personnel during the period of 1ATF's presence in Phuoc Tuy attest to the popularity and genuine good regard in which Australians were held.¹⁹

Conclusion

The experience of civic action in Vietnam provided valuable lessons for the Australian Army. Four and a half years was sufficient time for basic principles to be bedded down. Effective techniques were refined. Mistakes were identified. Lessons were learned.²⁰ The impact of civic action on the populace was able to be assessed.

Endnotes

1. For example, the US Army had civil affairs mobile training teams in Vietnam from 1962 and three civil affairs companies from 1966; Jeff Clarke, A Survey History of Civil Affairs Units and Teams in South Vietnam 1960-1971, unpublished paper supplied to author by US Department of the Army, Chief of Military History and the Center of Military History in October 1989, 8, 12, 13.
2. Ian McNeill, *To Long Tan: The Australian Army and the Vietnam War, 1950-1966* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, 1993), describes several civic action projects conducted by Australian infantry battalions prior to the arrival of the 1st Australian Civil Affairs Unit in June 1967: see, eg 152, 172-4, 390.
3. For a description of the politics and processes which led to the establishment of the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) organisation and increased US emphasis on pacification as a strategic goal, see Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (London: Picador, 1989), 629-57.
4. *The Division in Battle*, Pamphlet No 11, Counter-Revolutionary Warfare (Canberra: Army Headquarters, 1965), 86.
5. *Ibid*, 73.
6. Of the US 2nd Civil Affairs Company, based in Long Binh in III Corps which also had units in Gia Dinh, Bien Hoa, Binh Duong, Tay Ninh, Long An and Hau Nghia Provinces: Clarke, History. 26.
7. While the formal record shows the 14th AA Platoon was attached, the Civil Affairs Units first Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel John F McDonagh, told the author that the two units operated virtually independently.
8. Clarke, History, 26. General Peter Gratton, discussion with author, October 2002.
9. Gratton, discussion with author, October 2002.
10. Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 558, 629, 632, 636, 652, 653.
11. Lieutenant Colonel Peter Gratton, report , '5RAR Civic Action project—Ong Trinh, January 1970', AWM 100 R723/1/7, Australian War Memorial.
12. *The Division in Battle*, Pamphlet No 11, *Counter-Revolutionary Warfare*, ch 6, 53.
13. In Vietnam, if the populace felt a sense of ownership, and the project was subsequently damaged by the VC, then the outcome would presumably be antagonism towards the VC. Creating a sense of ownership involved encouraging the local population to suggest projects, and to actively participate in their construction to the maximum extent possible after the Civil Affairs Unit provided the necessary materials.
14. Solatium was a US policy adhered to by the Australian Army whereby non-battle injury or damage to Vietnamese civilians or their property saw the civilians receive money as compensation. There was a formal scale of damages and extent of injuries to which were attached particular levels of payments.
15. 'Report on Civic Military Action: Mar 70 -Feb 71', 23 February 1971, AWM 100 176/1/84.
16. Interview with Mr Nguyen Minh Ninh, 23 April 1990.
17. Gratton, discussion with author, October 2002. By building Phuoc Tuy Province up economically and establishing the rudiments of local government through such means as building roads, improving transportation, developing health and education facilities and generally assisting the development of the local economy, Australia was creating a climate in which the Government of South Vietnam could have worked to achieve its own aims, but that Government proved incapable of doing so.
18. Lieutenant Colonel JF McDonagh, 'Civil Affairs in Phuoc Tuy Province, South Vietnam, 1967-68', *Army Journal* No 231 (August 1968), 3-15.
19. See, eg Gratton's report 5RAR Civic Action project - Ong Trinh, January 1970, which describes the relationships forged between 5RAR personnel in Ong Trinh Hamlet during the construction of the school therein 1969-70: AWM 100 723/1/7. Also, many Civil Affairs Unit members enjoyed positive relationships with a range of Vietnamese officials, contractors and civilians.
20. Gratton believes the experience of civic action in Vietnam belies the principle of military civic action that a project must have a short completion time. Quoting outcomes of longer-term projects such as the school built by 5RAR in Ong Trinh, and the road construction carried out by 1 Field Squadron, he believes that in terms of human interaction and forging relationships between providers and recipient, long term projects with participants working alongside each other produces positive outcomes.