



Australia and the Vietnam War

Background

Vietnam had been a French colony since the 1860s. Between 1940 and 1945 it had been brutally occupied by Japan, an occupation that

Vietminh a Vietnamese nationalist coalition of anti-Japanese and later anti-French forces. By 1954 it was dominated by communists.

came to an end following Japan's surrender to the Allies in August 1945. The French returned to regain their former colony but the nationalist **Vietminh** forces, which had been resisting the Japanese, rejected the French presence. This

led to the First Indochina War of 1946–54 between the nationalist Vietminh and the French. France's defeat by the Vietminh in 1954 did not lead to a complete Vietnamese unified independence. Following the 1954 Geneva Conference, Vietnam was divided at the 17th parallel, in a manner similar to that of Korea. North Vietnam became a communist state ruled by Ho Chi Minh, while South Vietnam became a non-communist state eventually under the control of Ngo Dinh Diem.

The United States gave Diem solid support as he was seen as a reliable anti-communist leader. Billions of dollars poured into South Vietnam in the form of economic and military assistance. American military advisers called the Green

Berets trained Diem's army.

Vietcong began as a coalition of anti-Diem forces called the National Liberation Front. It engaged in guerrilla activities against the southern government.

The Vietcong came to be dominated by communists.

However, by the early 1960s, the Diem regime had become deeply unpopular. Much of the opposition came from southern communists called the **Vietcong**. The Vietcong received help from North

Vietnam who sent supplies south along what came to be called the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Diem and his brother Nhu were assassinated in November 1963. South Vietnam fell into chaos and by late 1964 the communists seemed on the point of taking control. In 1965, US President Johnson decided to commit American troops to stop South Vietnam falling under communist control.

Australia's commitment to Vietnam began in 1962 when the Menzies government sent 30 advisers to help train the South Vietnamese army. By 1964, there were sixty Australian advisers. In April 1965, Australia received a 'request' from the South Vietnamese government to send military assistance in its fight with the communists. Menzies quickly agreed.

However, it was discovered in the mid-1970s that Menzies had deceived the Australian parliament. South Vietnam had no need for Australian troops – it had the Americans. However, the Menzies government persuaded the Americans to ask the South Vietnamese to make the request. Menzies wanted to present Australia as a loyal ally and to reinforce the United States' involvement in the region. The reasons for Australia's desire to enter the Vietnam War are explained in Source 6.22.

Menzies retired as prime minister in January 1966. He was succeeded by Harold Holt. Holt visited President Johnson in Washington DC in July and announced to his American audience: 'You have an admiring friend, a staunch friend that will be all the way with **LBJ**'. Johnson visited Australia in October and was generally received by enthusiastic crowds. Holt easily won the November 1966 election, which was essentially fought on his support of Australian involvement in Vietnam.

The Australian War Memorial website states:

LBJ were the initials of American President Lyndon Baines Johnson (November 1963–January 1969)

From the time of the arrival of the first members of the Team in 1962 almost 60,000 Australians, including ground troops and air force and navy personnel, served in Vietnam; 521 died as a result of the war and over 3,000 were wounded. (www.cambridge.edu.au/historynsw10weblinks.)





Source 6.21 Robert Menzies (left) meets with US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara (right) at the Pentagon

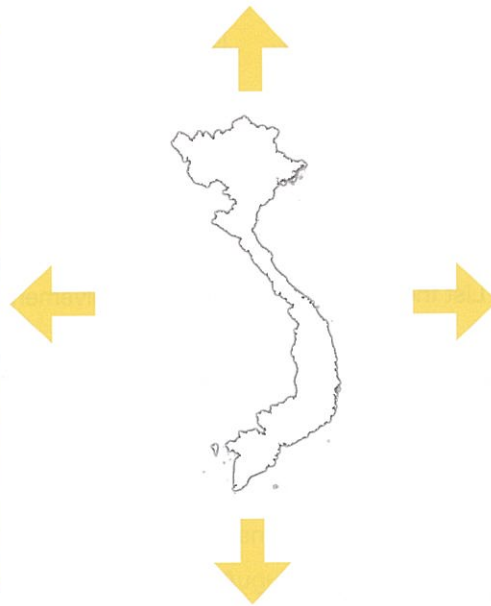
**HISTORICAL
FACT**

Australia's Prime Minister from January 1966 to December 1967, Harold Holt, disappeared on 17 December 1967 when swimming at Cheviot Beach on Point Nepean near Portsea in Port Phillip Bay. Holt's body was never found. This led to wild rumours that he had faked his disappearance to run off with a mistress or that he had been abducted by a UFO or that he was a Chinese spy and had been picked up by a Chinese submarine. It is likely that he drowned.



The Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies was a determined enemy of communism. He had often accused the Labor Party of having communist links. In 1950 he passed a law to ban the Communist Party and then attempted to ban the party with a referendum when the law was declared invalid by the High Court. He warned Australia of Soviet spying during the Petrov Affair. Menzies strongly supported the American policy of containment, i.e. preventing the spread of communism wherever that might occur. Australia had already backed the United States in its anti-communist crusade in the Korean War and had backed Britain in its campaign against communist guerrillas during the Malayan Emergency. Thus, involvement in Vietnam to stop the further spread of communism was a logical extension of Menzies' earlier policies.

Attacks on the Australian mainland and New Guinea during World War II reinforced the idea of 'forward defence'. This was a key element in Australian strategic thinking; it was much better to fight one's enemies beyond Australia's shores rather than wait for them to reach Australia. Hence, it was better to fight communism in Vietnam rather than wait for it to come to Australia itself.



Menzies believed that Australia had treaty obligations to support the United States due to its involvement in ANZUS and SEATO. Though neither treaty legally bound Australia to support the United States, Menzies believed that the spirit of those agreements involved a moral obligation for Australia to support the United States in Vietnam.

Arguably, the main reason for Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War was that it was an insurance policy. The main security concern for Australia in the early 1960s was not Vietnam, but Indonesia. Indonesia's erratic leader, President Sukarno, had already invaded West Papua, and he was in military conflict with Malaya. Sukarno also had close links with Indonesia's popular Communist Party. Australia wanted to reinforce the United States' involvement in the region so that if it ever faced direct conflict with Indonesia, it would have a better chance of having American support. Fighting in Vietnam would prove Australia a loyal ally, and provide a kind of insurance policy should Australia ever need help against Indonesia.

Source 6.22 Why Australia entered the Vietnam War

HISTORICAL FACT

The term Vietcong was a shortened slang term derived from the Vietnamese term for Vietnamese Communist, 'cong san Viet Nam'.



Activity 6.6

- 1 Using the information in this chapter, list points that can be used to support the following two propositions.

The conflict in Vietnam was a nationalist struggle for national independence	The conflict in Vietnam was yet another example of communist aggression

- 2 Examine Source 6.22. List the reasons for Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War in four brief bullet points.

Australian involvement in the Vietnam War

The first Australian battalion in Vietnam was 1RAR (Royal Australian Regiment), which arrived in Vietnam in March 1965 and served in Bien Hoa province. In March 1966, it was replaced by 3RAR. Two battalions were later added plus

a RAAF squadron of Iroquois helicopters. These troops were based at Nui Dat in Phuoc Tuy province. They were assigned their own area of operations. Later on additional RAAF squadrons went to Vietnam and on occasions the Australian Navy joined the Americans in patrols off the North Vietnamese coast.

The most significant action seen by the Australians in Vietnam was the Battle of Long Tan



Source 6.23 Phuoc Tuy province, South Vietnam, November 1966: 6RAR soldiers follow an armoured personnel carrier (APC) during Operation Ingham, a 'search and destroy' mission (AWM)

in August 1966. One hundred and eight men of 6RAR found themselves up against a Vietcong force of about 2000 men. The battle lasted for over four hours in a tropical downpour. By the end of the action, 245 Vietcong were dead. In the engagement, 17 Australians died and 25 were wounded. The battle ended Vietcong dominance in the province.

After the war, Vietcong soldiers explained how they did not like having to fight the Australians. The following extract is from Trinh Duc, a Village Chief.

“Worse than the Americans were the Australians. The Americans’ style was to hit us, then call for planes and artillery. Our response was to break contact and disappear if we could, but if we

couldn’t we’d move up right next to them so the planes couldn’t get at us. The Australians were more patient than the Americans, better guerrilla fighters, and better at ambushes. They liked to stay with us instead of calling in the planes. We were more afraid of their style.”

Once US President Nixon began his policy of **Vietnamisation**, Australian numbers in the country began to decline and their main task became training the South Vietnamese army. The last Australian battalion was withdrawn in November 1971; the final Australian troops left South Vietnam following the election of the Whitlam government in December 1972.

Vietnamisation was the policy of US President Nixon to reduce the number of US troops in Vietnam, and have the South Vietnamese army doing the fighting, with US military aid

Activity 6.7

- 1 Draw a timeline of the Australian involvement in the Vietnam War.
- 2 Describe what happened at Long Tan in August 1966.
- 3 In what activities were Australian troops engaged during the Vietnam War?
- 4 Compare Trinh Duc’s opinions of American and Australian fighting tactics.
- 5 Recount when the Australian involvement in Vietnam came to an end.

Research 6.3

Using the resources of the Australian War Memorial (www.cambridge.edu.au/historynsw10weblinks) research the following.

- 1 List some of the particular tasks carried out by specific Australian military groups during the Vietnam War.
- 2 Explain what a Victoria Cross is.
- 3 How many Australians earned the Victoria Cross during the Vietnam War? Who were they? For what were they given the Victoria Cross?