



VIETNAM VETERANS'DAY SPEECH BRISBANE 2009

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Her Excellency the Governor of Queensland, Ms Penelope Wensley, AO
The Honourable Anna Bligh, Premier of Qld
Mr John-Paul Langbroek, Leader of the Opposition
Fellow Vietnam Veterans, Ladies and Gentlemen

Ladies and gentlemen the last Australians missing in action from the Vietnam War have been located and will soon be home.

There were around 60,000 Australians who served in Vietnam from June 1962. Australia's involvement in the Vietnam conflict may have started when Colonel Ted Serong stepped onto the tarmac of Saigon Airport as the Australia's first Military Advisor.

Australia lifted its involvement in the Vietnam campaign in 1965 by deploying a full battalion. Australian's commitment in Vietnam was to continue until withdrawal in 1973.

During that period of Australia's commitment there were 2430 Australian casualties. and between them they received 1064 British and foreign awards.

But when did the Vietnam War start and end? This is a difficult question, because there is no answer. When the war "started" often depends on which event people are referring to:

Vietnam was at war from 1945 until 1973.

The **Australian Army** sent 42407 troops to Vietnam between 1962 and 1973.

One of the major events during Australia's involvement was the Battle of Long Tan. This battle occurred in the late afternoon of 18 August 1966. It was in a rubber plantation some 4500 metres to the east of the Task Force base at Nui Dat. The loss of and threat to life on both fronts was heavy.

Australian artillery played a significant role in this battle. The artillery's success in preventing the enemy from overrunning the position was critical. At 1720 hrs, artillery began firing regimental missions as ordered by the Forward Observer (FO), Captain Stanley. Artillery fire was brought within 100 metres of friendly positions.

The number of Australians fallen at Long Tan was 18. The North Vietnamese casualties were much higher. A captured Viet Cong dispensary log listed the Long Tan commitment as 878 KIA, missing or died of wounds and 1500 WIA.

Although not widely known, the Battle of Binh Ba, a 2 day battle that commenced on 06 June 1969 was a significant event for the Australian Army. Its significance was such that Battle Honours were awarded to the Royal Australian Regiment, the 1st Armoured Regiment and the 3rd Cavalry Regiment. This year is the 40th anniversary of this battle. There was 1 Australian lost in this battle along with 11 casualties. The North Vietnamese losses and injured exceeded 100.



Let us not forget the enormous contribution the men and women of **Australia's Medical Teams** made to the health and well being of all those who served in Vietnam.

The **Royal Australian Air Force** committed 4443 personnel over the life of the Vietnam campaign commencing in 1964 when a flight of Caribous began flying transport operations around South Vietnam. The following year RAAF helicopters began operations and in 1967 a squadron of Canberra bombers arrived in the country. Other RAAF personnel performed a variety of roles in Vietnam, from aero medical evacuations to airfield construction and combat flying with United States forces.

The **Army of the Republic of Vietnam** was the military force of the Republic of Vietnam which existed from October 1955 until the fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975. The Army of the Republic of Vietnam is often erroneously used as a collective term to refer to all South Vietnamese military forces, including the Vietnam Air Force and the Republic of Vietnam Navy. They are estimated to have suffered 1,170,000 casualties during the Vietnam War.

Just after the fall of Saigon and the North Vietnamese takeover, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam was dissolved. While some members had fled the country to the United States or elsewhere, hundreds of thousands of former Army of the Republic of Vietnam soldiers were sent to reeducation camps by the newly-unified Vietnamese communist government.

The **Royal Australian Navy**, as the senior service, is always first into the conflict. The Navy was in Vietnam "showing the flag" with HMAS Vampire and Quickmatch in early 1962. This visit was quickly followed by a similar "flag showing" with HMAS Quiberon and Queenborough in January 1963. But the Royal Australian Navy's presence was indirectly made earlier by the hulk of the auxiliary minelayer HMAS Bungaree laid up on the southern banks of Vung Tau Harbour long before Australia entered the conflict.

HMAS Sydney's first voyage to South Vietnam as a Troop Carrier, escorted by HMAS Melbourne, Duchess and Parramatta, began on 27 May 1965.

Between 1965 and 1972 the Royal Australian Navy maintained continuous operational service in Vietnam. During this period the Navy performed a variety of operational tasks at sea, ashore and in the air. The RAN's primary contribution consisted of destroyers, Fleet Air Arm personnel attached to a United States Army assault helicopter company and the Royal Australian Air Force's No. 9 Squadron, a Clearance Diving Team, and a logistic support force consisting of transport and escort ships. Other RAN personnel served ashore in medical teams or performed staff duties at the Australian Embassy in Saigon or the Australian Task Force Headquarters in Nui Dat. The RAN Fleet Band also completed a short tour of Vietnam entertaining troops during periods of rest and recreation.

The Vietnam War was not a significant naval conflict but there were 13,500 RAN members involved and recognised for active service. The RAN's contribution, although small in comparison to that of the United States Navy, was diverse and played a significant part in the Australian Forces overall commitment. The first RAN destroyers to deploy to Vietnam were the *Charles F. Adams* class guided missile destroyers Hobart, Perth and Brisbane. The Australian DDG's were well suited for the task of providing Naval Gunfire Support.



The *Daring* class destroyer HMAS Vendetta was also deployed for service on the gunline. Vendetta was the only Australian built warship to fire a shot in anger during the Vietnam conflict. Her main armament consisted of six 4.5 inch guns capable of providing accurate and rapid fire to a range of nine nautical miles at a rate of 16 rounds per gun per minute.

The guns of HMAS Vendetta proved to be extremely accurate which fitted her well to wear the naval gunfire support ship title of a "9 mile sniper". This year is the 40th anniversary of HMAS Vendetta's departure to Vietnam from Australia in September 1969.

HMAS Hobart was the first DDG to join the US Seventh Fleet in March 1967 beginning the six monthly rotations of RAN destroyers on the gunline. Hobart and Perth deployed three times to Vietnam, Brisbane twice and Vendetta once. The destroyers carried out NGS missions in all of South Vietnam's four military regions.

Hobart, Perth and Vendetta came under enemy attack on a number of occasions. Perth was hit once during her first deployment. Hobart suffered two killed and seven wounded when she was mistakenly hit by missiles fired from a United States Air Force aircraft. Vendetta came under rocket and swimmer attack in Da Nang harbour and mortar attack off the coast of the Quang Tin province.

Both Hobart and Perth received US Navy Unit Commendations and the Commanding Officer of Vendetta, CMDR Eric Johnstone, received an individual US Navy Commendation.

One of the smallest, and unrivalled, Australian units to serve in Vietnam was [Clearance Diving Team 3](#) (CDT3). They were an elite group of 49 officers and men; divers trained in the dangerous business of explosive ordnance disposal, who established an enviable reputation for courage and innovation in time of war in the spirit of the diver's motto, *United and Undaunted*.

Mention [The Vung Tau Ferry](#) to any Vietnam veteran and they will immediately recall HMAS Sydney, the former aircraft carrier that was later converted as a fast troop transport and destined to become the mainstay of naval logistic support operations for Australian forces in Vietnam.

HMAS Sydney's first voyage to Vietnam in May 1965, transported the First Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, from Sydney to Vung Tau in southern Vietnam.

Between 1965 and 1972, HMAS Sydney undertook 25 voyages to Vietnam and transported over 16,000 troops, 5,753 deadweight tons of cargo and 2,375 vehicles.

Her escorts included HMA Ships Melbourne, Anzac, Derwent, Duchess, Parramatta, Stuart, Swan, Torrens, Vampire, Vendetta and Yarra.

In 1966 the Vietnam supply line was supplemented by two Australian National Line cargo ships, Jeparit and Boonaroo. In March 1967 members of the Seamen's Union refused to man Jeparit and Boonaroo. To overcome this difficulty, Boonaroo was immediately commissioned by the Royal Australian Navy with a full naval crew for one return voyage to Cam Ranh Bay and Singapore. Jeparit was later commissioned following further industrial action.



Between 1967 and 1971 the [RAN Helicopter Flight](#), was fully integrated with the US Army 135th Assault Helicopter Company flying Iroquois helicopters in both the utility and gun-ship configurations.

The role of 135th Assault Helicopter Company was to provide tactical air movement of combat troops, supplies and equipment in air-mobile operations. This included augmentation of army medical services, search and rescue and the provision of a command and control aircraft capability.

Throughout the RAN Helicopter Flight's deployment there were many individual acts of bravery performed in the face of the enemy. One such incident occurred on 4 December 1971 when Lieutenant Jim Buchanan, RAN, was piloting a helicopter operating in the U-Minh Forest. While engaged in the medical evacuation the group came under heavy attack from enemy forces. Realizing that the boat on which he was operating was disabled and drifting towards the enemy held shore, Lieutenant Buchanan deliberately hooked the skids of his aircraft onto the boat's superstructure and towed it to a safe area. He was subsequently awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and I believe he was also awarded the US Navy Cross last year.

Members of the RAN also served at the Headquarters Australian Forces Vietnam. RAN doctors served with the 1st Australian Field Hospital and US Army and Navy hospitals. While serving in this capacity the Navy doctors were also involved in the Medical Civil Action Program which provided medical support to the local civilian population.

In April 1971 the McMahon Liberal Government announced that Australian forces in Vietnam would be reduced. This led to the withdrawal of the clearance diving team in May and the RAN Helicopter Flight in June. The final RAN destroyer to serve on the gunline, Brisbane, returned to Sydney in October 1971.

The transport Jeparit returned to Sydney from her final voyage on 11 March 1972 and Sydney arrived the following day. After winning the General Elections in December 1972 the Whitlam Labor government completed the withdrawal process and stopped military aid to South Vietnam.

During the 10 years that the RAN was involved in the war, eight officers and sailors were killed and another 46 were either wounded or suffered other injuries. The dedication and professionalism shown by members of the RAN earned the Service the respect of our Allies and continued the traditions established by Australian sailors in other wars.

For those who made the sacrifice for Vietnam you are now totally alone but place yourself in the hands of your mates by your side. They will always look out for your back as you will look out for theirs. On your return to our shores you will remember those mates who stood by you as they will remember you.