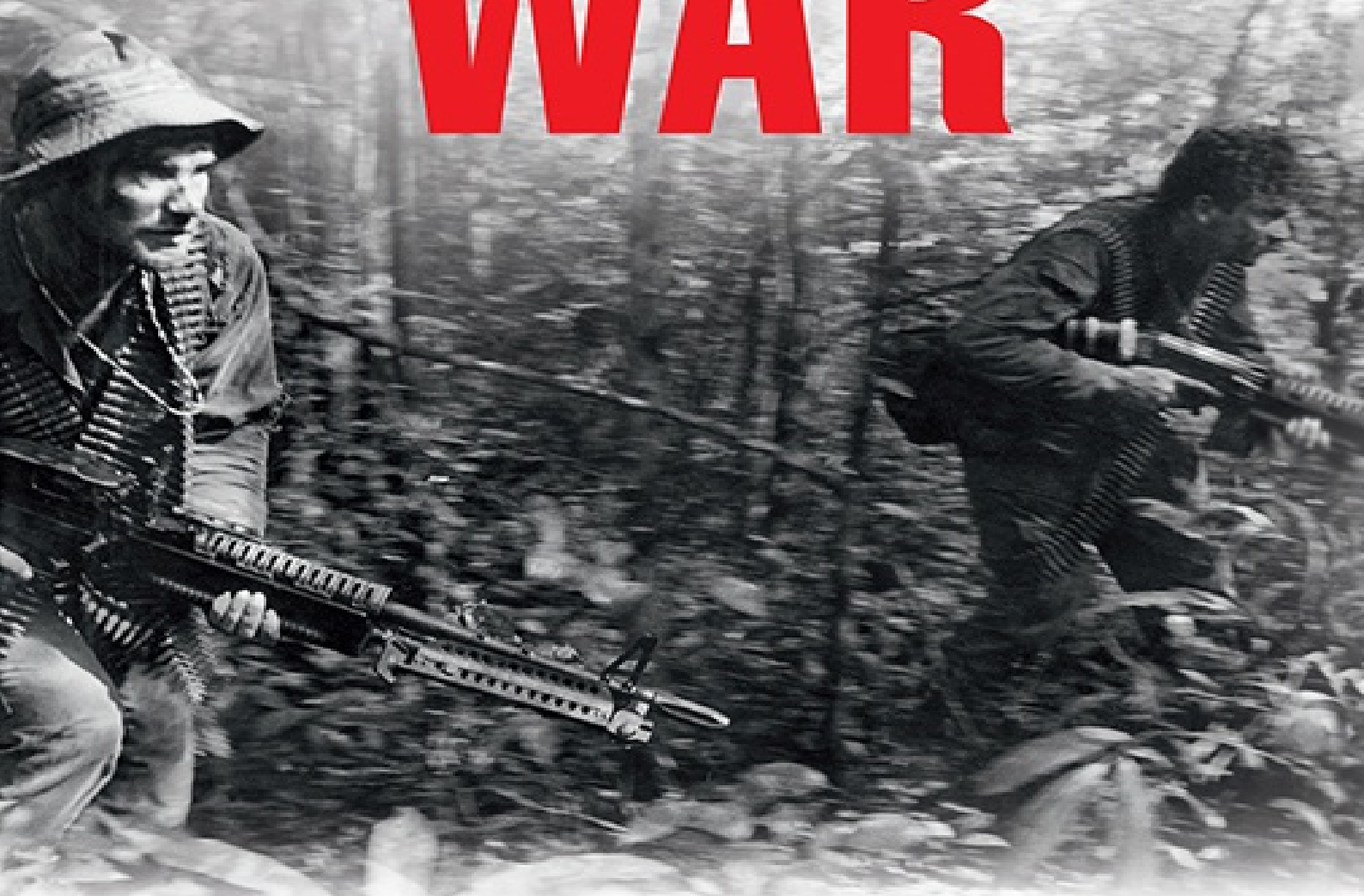


THE ESSENTIAL HISTORY

# AUSTRALIA AND THE VIETNAM WAR



PETER EDWARDS

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PETER EDWARDS is the Official Historian and general editor of the nine-volume *Official History of Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948–1975*. He is also the author of the volume dealing with politics, strategy and diplomacy, *Crises and Commitments* (1992) and *A Nation at War* (1997). His other books and monographs include *Robert Marsden Hope and Australian Public Policy* (2011), *Arthur Tange: Last of the Mandarins* (2006), *Permanent Friends? Historical Reflections on the Australian-American Alliance* (2005), and *Prime Ministers and Diplomats* (1983). Currently an Adjunct Professor at the Alfred Deakin Research Institute of Deakin University, he is a Member of the Order of Australia, a Fellow of the Australian Institute of International Affairs, and a former Trustee of the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne.

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*Cover images* FRONT A section of soldiers from C Company, 2RAR/NZ (ANZAC), taking part in the battalion's final operation in Phuoc Tuy province in May 1971 before returning to Australia later in the month. Carrying the section's M60 machine gun is Private Ray Beattie (left) of St Kilda, Victoria. (John Alfred Ford, 1971; AWM FOD/71/0258A/VN)

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In January 1965 the Australian government decided to send an infantry battalion to Borneo to help Britain and its Commonwealth partners to secure Malaysia's borders from Indonesian incursions. Three months later the government announced that it would send another battalion overseas, this time to help another powerful ally, the United States, to protect another Southeast Asian country, the Republic of Vietnam (commonly known as South Vietnam), against the threat posed by insurgents supported by the communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam). The commitment to Borneo ended within two years, during which time the threat to the integrity and security of Malaysia was successfully overcome; it cost little blood or treasure; it was met by deploying service personnel, almost all of whom had enlisted voluntarily; it had bipartisan support in Parliament; its wisdom was seldom challenged; its operations were largely conducted in secret; and, although it had been a major concern for policy-makers, the media and the general public in the early 1960s, it was quickly forgotten by most Australians. By contrast, the commitment to Vietnam lasted more than seven years (or ten, if one starts with the commitment of a team of advisers in 1962), making it Australia's longest overseas conflict in the 20th century and the largest and most costly other than the two world wars; it did not prevent the downfall of the Republic of Vietnam ten years later; it was maintained partly by deploying conscripts, chosen by a highly controversial, selective ballot of men too young to vote; its wisdom and morality were challenged by an increasing number of Australians, provoking deep divisions in Australian society and politics; it was linked to bitter, worldwide controversies that remained prominent for decades; and for years afterwards it was identified with strategic, diplomatic, military, political and social failure and ineptitude.

This book seeks to explain how and why Australia became involved in the Vietnam War (more accurately but less commonly known as the Second Indochina War); how Australian forces fought the war; how the war affected Australian society and politics; and how 'Vietnam' and 'the Vietnam era' left enduring legacies on Australian politics, society, strategy and diplomacy. It says much about Australia's alliance with the United States in a conflict widely seen as a 'hot war' within the global Cold War. But it also shows that Australia's commitment to the Vietnam War was in many ways different from that of the United States. The strategic concerns, diplomatic style and operational methods of a global superpower located in the northern hemisphere were markedly different from those of a middle-sized regional power, adjacent to Southeast Asia. This book puts the Australian commitment in the context of Australia's relations with Southeast Asia in the decades after the end of the Second World War, with special reference to Australia's involvement in two other conflicts in the region, the Malayan Emergency of 1948–60 and the Indonesian Confrontation of 1963–66. It explains why Australia's Southeast Asian conflicts in the third quarter of the 20th century have been described both as 'wars of diplomacy' (referring particularly to alliance diplomacy) and as 'wars of decolonisation'.

This book is not part of the *Official History of Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948–1975*, but it relies heavily on the information and arguments found in the nine volumes of the series of which, as Official Historian, I was general editor and author of the two volumes dealing with politics, strategy and diplomacy. While I draw most heavily from those two volumes and the three by Ian McNeill and Ashley Ekins on the Australian Army in Vietnam, I have also made substantial use of the information and insights provided by the authors of the other four volumes: Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey on Australian operations in the Malayan Emergency and the Indonesian Confrontation.



Brendan O’Keefe on medical aspects of the three conflicts, with an essay by FB Smith on the Age of Orange debate; Chris Coulthard-Clark on the Royal Australian Air Force in Vietnam; and Jeffrey Grey on the Royal Australian Navy throughout the whole period. Readers familiar with the tradition of Australian official war histories might regard this as the counterpart for the Southeast Asian conflict to CEW Bean’s *Anzac to Amiens* or Gavin Long’s *The Six Years War*. That is to say, it is a relatively short history of Australia’s involvement in a conflict (in this case, several conflicts), written by the Official Historian who was responsible for a multi-volume history of that involvement.

While this book draws heavily on the *Official History*, it aims to meet some contemporary requirements. Seven of the nine volumes of the *Official History* were published in the 1990s. While they have stood up well to the scrutiny of commentators and scholars in subsequent years, it is clearly appropriate to draw on more recent publications and commentaries. Moreover, this book is written primarily for a 21st-century readership, for whom the Vietnam era is remote and whose awareness of military affairs is framed by Australia’s involvement in more recent conflicts, particularly in Iraq, Afghanistan and East Timor. It addresses some of the principal questions that readers with no personal knowledge of the Vietnam era now ask: Why was there a war in Vietnam? How and why did Australia come to be involved? What was the domino theory and did it have any validity? Was Australia simply paying a premium for the strategic insurance provided by the Australian–American alliance? Was Australia really ‘all the way’ with the United States in its commitment to the Vietnam War? What was the nature of the Australian military involvement, including the relationships between the Australian and their American, New Zealand and South Vietnamese allies, and between regulars and national servicemen? Which elements of the three services were involved and how well did they perform operationally? Why did many Australians protest against conscription and the war? What have been some of the enduring legacies of the commitment and the lessons that Australians have drawn from the experience?

This is no more than a concise introduction to a long and complex subject. Many of the topics discussed, and others related to them, have been treated at much greater length elsewhere. A bibliographic note indicates where, both in the volumes of the *Official History* and in other publications, readers may find more information and detailed discussion of some of the themes of the book, and of topics for which there is insufficient space here, including the individual experiences of soldiers and other participants in the conflicts and controversies it discusses. The focus here is on the decisions by political and military leaders, which led to tens of thousands of Australians finding themselves in a bloody conflict in Southeast Asia, and to suggest a perspective that 21st-century Australians might find useful in contemplating the lessons of a controversial war fought some 50 years ago.

Anything associated with the Vietnam War is likely to abound in paradoxes and contradictions. This book is both an individual product and the result of a great team effort; its preparation has been both extremely long and relatively brief. For many years, especially since the publication of *A Nation at War* in 1997, I have been encouraged to write a shorter history of Australia’s experience of the Vietnam War, linking it with the Malayan Emergency and the Indonesian Confrontation. I thought it appropriate to wait until after the publication of the ninth volume of the *Official History*, in 2012. On the advice of the then Director of the Australian War Memorial, Steve Gower, the Memorial’s Council commissioned me to write this book. I am grateful to them for their support, which continues and extends the work of the Memorial in supporting the tradition of Australian official war histories, for which governments of all political persuasions have granted unrestricted access to official records and an assurance of publication without political or official censorship. It is a tradition of which all Australian governments, and the Australian people, should be proud. I hope and believe that the team that was honoured to lead has lived up to the privileges and responsibilities of preparing an Australian

official war history: this book is presented in the hope that it will bring the fruits of all our labours to a wider range of readers.

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While the themes selected and the views expressed in this work are my own responsibility, the book relies heavily on the dedicated work, over many years, of the team of historians and researchers who contributed their considerable skill to the *Official History*. Those historians and researchers, especially the authors Ian McNeill, Ashley Ekins, Peter Dennis, Jeffrey Grey, Chris Coulthard-Clark, Brendan O’Keefe and FB Smith, would undoubtedly wish to acknowledge the contribution of the many others who are listed in the preface to each volume – researchers, archivists, librarians, official professional colleagues, families, friends and not least the veterans of the various conflicts. To sing out any at this time would be invidious. I can only state with all possible emphasis that whatever merit there may be in this book should be attributed to the skill and dedication of all those who worked on the *Official History* as members of the Official History Unit of the Australian War Memorial and those who gave us their support and assistance in many and varied ways.

For support and assistance in the preparation of this book, I wish to express my gratitude to the Council of the Australian War Memorial, especially successive chairmen General Peter Cosgrove and Rear Admiral Ken Doolan; to successive Directors Steve Gower and Brendan Nelson; to the Memorial staff, especially Linda Ferguson and Ashley Ekins, Anne Bennie, Ron Schroer, Stuart Bennington, Craig Berelle, Kate Dethridge, Alison Wishart, Matthew Cramp, Robert Nichols, Andrew McDonald and Christina Zissis; and to Phillipa McGuinness, Karen Penning and Di Quick at NewSouth Publishing. The manuscript of the book has been read by Richard Chauvel, Phillip Deery, Ashley Ekins, Ashley Hay, Michael O’Brien and Robert O’Neill, all of whom have offered helpful comments. Responsibility for any remaining errors of fact or interpretation is mine alone. My greatest debt, always, is to my wife, Jacky Abbott, for her support and toleration of the preoccupations of a recidivist historian.

Peter Edwards

# ABBREVIATIONS

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AATTV	Australian Army Training Team Vietnam
ABC	Australian Broadcasting Commission
ACP	Australian Communist Party
ACTU	Australian Council of Trade Unions
AFV	Australian Force Vietnam
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
ALP	Australian Labor Party
ANZAM	Anglo–New Zealand–Australia–Malaya (a defence agreement between UK, Australia and New Zealand governing forces in the Malayan area)
ANZUS	Australia New Zealand United States Security treaty
APC	armoured personnel carrier
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
ASIO	Australian Security Intelligence Organisation
CCOSC	Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee (Australia)
CDNSA	Committee in Defiance of the National Service Act
CGS	Chief of the General Staff (Australia)
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (US)
COMAFV	Commander Australian Force Vietnam
COMUSMACV	Commander of the United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam
CPA	Communist Party of Australia
CT	communist terrorist
DLP	Democratic Labor Party
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam (commonly known as North Vietnam)
FAD	Foreign Affairs and Defence (committee of the Australian Cabinet)
FANK	Forces Armées Nationales Khmer
FFV	Field Force Vietnam
FPDA	Five Power Defence Agreement
FSB	fire support base
HQ	headquarters
JWTC	Jungle Warfare Training Centre

MATT	Mobile Advisory Training Team
MCP	Malayan Communist Party
MHR	Member of the House of Representatives (Australian Parliament)
MRLA	Malayan Races Liberation Army
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCO	non-commissioned officer
NLF	National Liberation Front (National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam)
NVA	North Vietnamese Army (the common name for the People's Army of Vietnam)
PAP	People's Action Party (Singapore)
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam (commonly known as the North Vietnamese Army)
PF	Popular Force
PKI	Partai Kommunis Indonesia (Communist Party of Indonesia)
PLAF	People's Liberation Armed Forces
PRG	Provisional Revolutionary Government [of South Vietnam]
PTSD	post-traumatic stress disorder
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAF	Royal Air Force (UK)
RAR	Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR is 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, 2RAR is 2nd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, and so on)
RAN	Royal Australian Navy
RANHFV	Royal Australian Navy Helicopter Flight Vietnam
RF	Regional Force
RSL	Returned Services League (formerly the Returned Soldiers', Sailors' and Airmen's Imperial League of Australia, today the Returned and Services League)
RTFV	RAAF Transport Flight Vietnam
RVN	Republic of Vietnam (commonly known as South Vietnam)
SAS	Special Air Service
SEAC	South-East Asia Command
SEATO	South-East Asia Treaty Organization
SOS	Save Our Sons
TAOR	tactical area of responsibility
TPI	totally and permanently incapacitated
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation
USMACV	United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam

VCI	Viet Cong infrastructure
VVAA	Vietnam Veterans' Association of Australia
VVFA	Vietnam Veterans' Federation of Australia
YCAC	Youth Campaign Against Conscription

# CHRONOLOGY

---

**1945**

**17 AUGUST**

Sukarno and Hatta proclaim the independence of Indonesia.

**2 SEPTEMBER**

Japanese surrender ends the Second World War.

**2 SEPTEMBER**

Ho Chi Minh proclaims the independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

**1946**

**NOVEMBER–DECEMBER**

First Indochina War begins.

**1948**

**FEBRUARY**

Communist conference in Calcutta, followed by insurgencies in several countries in Southeast Asia.

**AUGUST**

Beginning of the Malayan Emergency.

**1949**

**4 APRIL**

Formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

**10 DECEMBER**

Liberal-Country party coalition wins election in Australia, with RG Menzies as Prime Minister.

**27 DECEMBER**

Netherlands formally transfers sovereignty to independent government of Indonesia, including all of former Netherlands East Indies except West New Guinea.

**1950**

**14 JANUARY**

Democratic Republic of Vietnam recognised by Soviet Union and China.

**8 FEBRUARY**

Australia recognises the French-sponsored State of Vietnam under Bao Dai.

**17 AUGUST**

President Sukarno proclaims unitary Republic of Indonesia.

**1951**

**1 SEPTEMBER**

ANZUS treaty signed.

**1953**

**MARCH**

French Minister Letourneau visits Australia.

**1954**

**7 MAY**

Surrender of French forces at Dien Bien Phu, on the eve of the opening of the Indochina session of the Geneva Conference.

**JULY**

Ngo Dinh Diem becomes Prime Minister of State of Vietnam under Bao Dai.

**JULY**

Geneva Accords establish temporary partition of Vietnam at 17th parallel.

**SEPTEMBER**

Formation of the South-East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) by United States, United Kingdom, France, Thailand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Australia and New Zealand.

**1955**

**OCTOBER**

Ngo Dinh Diem deposes Bao Dai and proclaims Republic of Vietnam with himself as President.

**1957**

**SEPTEMBER**

Ngo Dinh Diem visits Australia.

**1959**

**JANUARY**

Communist party in Hanoi authorises armed action by communists in South Vietnam.

**1960**

**JULY**

Malayan Emergency declared over.

**DECEMBER**

Hanoi leadership establishes the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF).

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DECEMBER

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**1962**

MAY

Meeting of ANZUS Council of Ministers, after which Australian government announces the deployment to Vietnam of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV), comprising 30 officers and senior NCOs, and an RAAF squadron of Sabre fighters to Thailand.

JULY

Geneva Agreement on Laos.

**1963**

JANUARY

Indonesian government declares policy of *konfrontasi* or Confrontation against proposed federation of Malaysia.

16 SEPTEMBER

Federation of Malaysia formed.

1-2 NOVEMBER

Assassination of President Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu.

23 NOVEMBER

Assassination of President John F Kennedy.

**1964**

JUNE

Australian government announces increase in AATTV to 80 advisers.

2-4 AUGUST

Gulf of Tonkin incident, followed by US congressional resolution.

AUGUST

Australia provides six Caribou transport aircraft in RAAF Transport Flight Vietnam (RTFV).

10 NOVEMBER

Australian government introduces defence measures including selective conscription for 20-year-old males under the National Service Act.

**1965**

JANUARY

Australian government commits an infantry battalion and an SAS squadron to Confrontation in Borneo (decision announced in Feb). AATTV increased to 100 advisers.

---

#### 30 MARCH–1 APRIL

---

Military staff talks between US, Australian and NZ representatives in Honolulu.

#### 29 APRIL

---

Prime Minister Menzies announces commitment of an infantry battalion to Vietnam.

#### MAY

---

1RAR and support elements, totalling about 1100 men, arrive at Bien Hoa air base, to serve with a US brigade.

#### 9 AUGUST

---

Separation of Singapore and Malaysia.

#### SEPTEMBER

---

Additional elements (artillery, engineers, army aviation and logistics) arrive at Bien Hoa, raising commitment to a battalion group of about 1400 men.

#### 30 SEPTEMBER–1 OCTOBER

---

Coup and counter-coup in Jakarta. In following months President Sukarno gradually removed from power, to be succeeded by army regime headed by General, later President, Suharto. Killing and imprisonment of hundreds of thousands of real or alleged communists destroys PKI.

### 1966

#### 26 JANUARY

---

Harold Holt succeeds Menzies as Prime Minister.

#### 8 MARCH

---

Australian government announces its commitment to be raised to a task force of two infantry battalions with combat and logistic support; total of about 4500 men, including 500 conscripts.

#### APRIL–JUNE

---

Australian task force arrives in Vietnam and establishes base at Nui Dat in Phuoc Tuy province. Logistic support group established at Vung Tau.

#### JUNE

---

1RAR completes tour and returns to Australia.

#### JUNE

---

RAAF sends squadron of Iroquois helicopters to support task force.

#### 11 AUGUST

---

Indonesia and Malaysia formally end Confrontation

#### 18 AUGUST

---

Battle of Long Tan.

## OCTOBER

---

President LB Johnson becomes first incumbent US President to visit Australia.

## NOVEMBER

---

Holt government wins record majority in election fought on Vietnam and conscription.

## 22 DECEMBER

---

Australian government announces further increases in the commitment to Vietnam, including elements from all three armed services.

## 1967

## MARCH–MAY

---

Australian task force constructs barrier minefield near Dat Do in Phuoc Tuy province.

## JULY

---

Presidential advisers Clark Clifford and Maxwell Taylor visit Australia and other US allies, seeking further troop commitments.

## JULY

---

Defense Secretary Robert McNamara commissions study of US policy on Vietnam, later known as ‘the Pentagon Papers’.

## JULY

---

UK announces withdrawal of forces ‘east of Suez’.

## 17 OCTOBER

---

Australian government announces the commitment of a third infantry battalion, a tank squadron, a joint RAAF/RAN helicopter squadron, and other elements, bringing total commitment to more than 8000 personnel. Australia informs US that no further additions possible.

## 17 DECEMBER

---

Harold Holt missing, presumed drowned.

## 21 DECEMBER

---

Memorial service for Holt attended by President Johnson, Prince Charles, British Prime Minister Harold Wilson, RVN President Thieu and other dignitaries.

## 1968

## 10 JANUARY

---

John Gorton sworn in as Prime Minister.

## JANUARY

---

UK announces acceleration of the withdrawal of forces ‘east of Suez’.

## 15–25 JANUARY

---

Gough Whitlam, Leader of the Opposition, visits Vietnam.

## 30–31 JANUARY

---

Start of Tet offensive throughout South Vietnam.

---

#### 2 FEBRUARY

---

Prime Minister Gorton announces that Australia will make no further additions to commitment in Vietnam.

#### FEBRUARY

---

Australian task force involved in major operations near Bien Hoa/Long Binh bases and in Phuoc Tuy

#### 16 MARCH

---

US Army company involved in brutal killing of hundreds of Vietnam civilians at My Lai. Incident does not become public until Nov 1969.

#### 31 MARCH

---

President Johnson orders halt to most bombing of North Vietnam and announces that he will not seek reelection.

#### 5 MAY–4 JUNE

---

Second communist offensive ('mini-Tet'). Australian battalions supported by tanks involved in major battles at Fire Support Bases Coral and Balmoral north of Saigon.

#### 7–9 JUNE

---

Prime Minister Gorton visits troops in Vietnam.

#### 5 NOVEMBER

---

Richard Nixon wins presidential election in US (takes office in January 1969).

### 1969

#### 8 JUNE

---

President Nixon announces a policy of 'Vietnamisation' and the withdrawal of 25 000 US troops.

#### 17 JULY

---

Task force begins final operation to clear the Dat Do minefield; finally declared cleared on 31 May 1970.

#### 2 SEPTEMBER

---

Ho Chi Minh dies in Hanoi, aged 79.

#### OCTOBER–NOVEMBER

---

Large anti-war demonstrations in US, including first 'Moratorium'.

#### 16 NOVEMBER

---

First public revelations of the My Lai massacre.

### 1970

#### 22 APRIL

---

Prime Minister Gorton announces that one battalion will not be replaced at the end of its tour in November, reducing the task force to two battalions.

**30 APRIL**

50 000 ARVN and 30 000 US troops attack communist sanctuaries in Cambodia. Widespread protests in US, especially on university campuses.

**8 MAY**

First Moratorium protests in Australia: 120 000 march in Australian cities in protest against Australian involvement in Vietnam War.

**31 AUGUST**

AATTV increased to more than 200, its highest strength, in late 1970 and early 1971.

**18 SEPTEMBER**

Second Moratorium protest in Australian cities.

**OCTOBER–NOVEMBER**

Australian task force reduced from three to two battalions.

**1971**

**FEBRUARY**

AATTV opens Jungle Warfare Training Centre at Nui Dat: moved in October to Van Kiep near Ba Ria; closed in December.

**10 MARCH**

William McMahon succeeds Gorton as Prime Minister.

**30 MARCH**

Prime Minister McMahon announces graduated withdrawal of 1000 personnel from all services over three months.

**30 JUNE**

Third and last Moratorium protest in Australia.

**JULY**

Publication of Pentagon Papers in US.

**18 AUGUST**

Prime Minister McMahon announces that nearly all combat troops will be withdrawn by Christmas, logistic forces soon afterwards; AATTV to remain.

**8 DECEMBER**

Last major withdrawal of combat troops from Vietnam.

**1972**

**FEBRUARY–MARCH**

Withdrawal of most remaining army and RAAF forces, leaving headquarters group and small contingent of soldiers, mostly in AATTV, in non-combat roles. HMAS *Sydney* undertakes the last of its 23 voyages between Australia and South Vietnam.

**30 MARCH**

North Vietnamese forces begin Easter Offensive. Finally repulsed by September, with aid of US air support.

**APRIL–MAY**

President Nixon authorises bombing of Hanoi-Haiphong area and mining of North Vietnamese ports.

**7 NOVEMBER**

President Nixon re-elected.

**2 DECEMBER**

Labor government elected in Australia, with Gough Whitlam as Prime Minister. In subsequent days conscription suspended, imprisoned draft resisters released, last troops ordered out of Vietnam.

**18 DECEMBER**

Last Australian troops (headquarters group and AATTV) withdraw, leaving a platoon to guard embassy in Saigon.

**18–29 DECEMBER**

Following breakdown of peace talks, ‘Christmas bombing’ of Hanoi and Haiphong ordered by President Nixon.

**1973**

**11 JANUARY**

Governor-General Sir Paul Hasluck proclaims cessation of hostilities in Vietnam by Australian force.

**27 JANUARY**

Peace treaty signed by representatives of US, RVN, DRV and PRG.

**26 FEBRUARY**

Prime Minister Whitlam announces establishment of diplomatic relations with DRV; diplomatic relations with RVN maintained, PRG not recognised.

**MAY–JUNE**

The last Australian soldiers, the platoon guarding the embassy in Saigon, leave Vietnam.

**JULY**

Australian Embassy in Hanoi opened under *chargé d'affaires*.

**1974**

**9 AUGUST**

Richard Nixon resigns as US President, succeeded by Gerald Ford.

**1975**

**JANUARY–APRIL**

PAVN ‘Ho Chi Minh offensive’ sweeps through South Vietnam.

**25 APRIL**

---

Australian Embassy in Saigon closed.

**30 APRIL**

---

RVN surrenders to PAVN troops, ending the Second Indochina War.

**6 MAY**

---

Australian government extends recognition to the new regime in South Vietnam.

**11 NOVEMBER**

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Whitlam government dismissed by the Governor-General, Sir John Kerr.

## DECOLONISATION AND THE COLD WAR IN SOUTHEAST ASIA 1945–50

The atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 brought the Second World War to an end, but did not begin a period of peace and political stability. During the next few years, many parts of the world were riven with tensions and conflicts, amid a widespread fear of a third global war, in which atomic bombs or even more devastating weapons might be used. Southeast Asia was one of the most bitterly contested regions, but well-informed observers and even participants found it difficult to understand the complex forces involved. With the advantages of historical perspective, we can see the cauldron of Southeast Asian politics in the late 1940s and early 1950s as a complex interaction between long-standing local rivalries and two of the great historical processes of the post-1945 world – the decolonisation of the European empires, and the Cold War between the communist ‘East’ and the non-communist ‘West’, led respectively by the Soviet Union and the United States, together with their respective friends, allies and satellites.

### THE DECOLONISATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

In the late 1940s and early 1950s the only certainty about the future of Southeast Asia was that it would be very different from its past.<sup>1</sup> At the outbreak of the Second World War the region was dominated by the European empires, which had extended their dominance over much of Africa and Asia starting in the 16th century, with a marked expansion in the 19th. By 1939 the Netherlands controlled most of the chain of islands from Sumatra in the west to the western half of New Guinea in the east; France governed the mainland territories collectively known as Indochina; Britain’s vast empire included Burma and a number of colonies and protectorates on the Malayan peninsula and its offshore islands, and on the western and northern coasts of Borneo; the United States governed the Philippines, a territory it had acquired from its victory over Spain in 1898; and Portugal had a tiny colony on the eastern half of the island of Timor. Only Thailand remained independent but, bordered by British territories on one side and French on the other, it generally deferred to both European powers.

After their victory over Germany, Italy and Japan in 1945, the British, French and Dutch authorities expected to reassert their pre-war control over their respective territories. Their desire to return was driven by much the same motives as those that had been behind their original acquisition, sometimes summarised as ‘gold, God and glory’ – that is, to gain access to valuable resources, to spread Christianity, and to acquire the prestige that accompanied imperial status. In particular, the European governments, economically exhausted by years of depression and war, wanted to regain strategic and valuable resources such as oil, rubber, tin and rice. The French and the Dutch especially sought reassurance that, after their humiliation at the hands of Nazi Germany and Japan, they could now return to the top table of world powers. They were shocked to discover the strength of the resistance that they encountered from nationalist movements seeking independence. The ease and speed with which the Japanese established control over Southeast Asia in 1941–42 had destroyed the aura of European invincibility. The fall of Singapore in February 1942 had had a huge symbolic effect in the



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