

Australians at War Vietnam

With any war / conflict, various stories abound. In regards to Australian and New Zealand Military commitment to South Vietnam, some quarters view the fall of South Vietnam in 1975 as a loss, nothing could be further from the truth; our combat troops (like the US and NZ combat troops) left 2 years earlier. In 1975, Australia had an Embassy in Hanoi.

With Vietnam Veterans Day upon us I dedicate this article to those committed men and women who carried out a very difficult job at a time when public support for those who served their nation in Vietnam was limited, and emphasise that

For us it was a WIN with the JOB Well DONE.

Firstly let's start at the end, those Aussie's, Kiwis and Americans who served in Vietnam did their job and were returned to their respective countries to a less than respectful welcome. The signing of the agreement between North and South Vietnam was to be one of a cessation of hostilities.

Our Governor General, Sir Paul Hasluck announced on 11 January 1973 to the people of Australia that HOSTILITIES IN VIETNAM HAVE CEASED and that there was a Cessation of Combat Operations. However some troops remained as guards and logistic – maintenance personnel.

In the two year period between the signing of the Paris Peace Accords on 27 January 1973 and the invasion of South Vietnam by North Vietnam in 1975 there were multiple breaches of the Peace Accords by both sides resulting in a staggering number of casualties. This included 18,000 cease-fire violations resulting in 76,000 dead, wounded or missing in the first 6 months. *These figures are from the Canadian International Commission For Supervision and Control Observer information.*

These violations signified the **commencement of the third Vietnam War, a Conventional War directly between North and South Vietnam**; the first War was during the French Occupation, the second was when the US and its Allies were providing support to the South Vietnamese Government up to January 1973 when Combat troops were withdrawn. **The third began at the time of the signing of the Peace Accords.**

Our troops demonstrated that they were highly disciplined jungle fighters and their combat achievements contributed towards the signing of the Paris Peace Accords as our troops were not beaten, did not retreat, did not have anyone taken POW or have any Base or Unit routed.

Vietnam was a media war that greeted us 24 hours a day especially via the television. We could watch battles between toast and tea at breakfast, we watched medivacs between soup and main course in the evening. Programs or news coverage that provide opportunity for the viewer to take part in something frightening, dangerous or exciting and not actually be there rate just as highly today as they did then. From experiencing over a decade of continuous media exposure to the War, a degree of desensitisation will have occurred for some due to the selected reporting.

Media watch programs exposed some of the bias reporting; in the US there has been acknowledgement by some reporters to their less than equal, honest, and very bias reporting of the Vietnam War resulting in their dismissals. Our previous recent wars had limited media coverage or media black-out; these were the Malayan Emergency, Borneo Confrontation and

the Korean Police Action. These Wars were also subject to a name change, initially due to the London Insurance Market at the time of the Malayan Emergency; if a war was declared, no payout or coverage. The Vietnam War was originally referred to as the Vietnam Conflict. This deceit by not calling War a War resulted in varied views by the general public and some ex Service Organisations/members, especially as we had experienced two World Wars called Wars, hence the comments 'if it was a real War it would be called a War', *wrong*, politics played a greater role than we realised at the time.

However, Vietnam for those who served, like previous wars and today's wars, peace keeping, or conflict by any other name it is one of constant alertness, broken sleep, intense action and exhaustion. Like today, this war had no line in the sand to divide the opposing forces; the stall seller who sold the cold drink by day could be directing mortar fire onto your position by night.

The only people qualified to assess the media portrayal of the Vietnam War are those who served there, the Vietnam Veterans.

At the end of the First Vietnam War the Peace Accords signed resulted in a reasonable peace for about two years, similar at the least was expected with the signing of the 1973 Peace Accords bringing to an end the hostilities in Vietnam. Controversy surrounds the wording and agreements placed on the signatories, even today.

They were to be effective, midnight 27 January 1973, GMT.

The Accords were briefly;

- A ceasefire would be in place, no troop movement to occur apart for provision of resupply of items used since signing of the Accords.
- US and Allied **Combat Troops to withdraw** and withdrawal be completed within 60 days. POW's returned and the remains of those killed repatriated.
- Saigon representatives and Viet-Cong to negotiate a political settlement using free and democratic elections.
- Reunification of Vietnam to be a 'step by step' means.

Maintenance of the ceasefire was carried out by Communist and non-Communist Nations.

Canada provided observers between January and July 1973 when the above violations occurred; they also supervised the exchange of the 32,000 prisoners of war.

One concession not granted to the South or US was the requirement of North Vietnamese troops to leave the South. At the time of the signing of the Accords there were an estimated 145,000 NVA troops in South Vietnam, 30,000 across the border of Laos and 70,000 across the Cambodian border.

All areas where there were US personnel, the roads were monitored, no monitoring of the roads used by the North Vietnamese into the south occurred.

Other less known information during the second Vietnam War was the presence of Chinese troops in North Vietnam; between 1965 and 1970 over 320,000 PRC troops served in North Vietnam to free-up the North Vietnamese to continue their fight in the south.

The Soviet Union stationed 3,000 troops in Vietnam during the War and North Korea provided a Fighter Squadron in 1968 to defend Hanoi, 200 pilots were reported to have served along with two Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiments as well as providing 2,000,000 uniforms, weapons and ammunition. China and the Soviet Union also provided munitions, weapons and other military supplies and assistance.

1974 Nixon resigns and North Vietnamese re-evaluate the ramifications of the resignation and decide to test the implications.

1974 Saw the invasion of the South by the North Vietnamese who entered the province of Phouc Binh, north of Saigon on the Cambodian border.

1975 January, Phouc Long, provincial capital of Phouc Binh captured by the Communist North.

1975 March, full scale invasion by North Vietnamese who used 17 Divisions formed into 4 Army Corps, spearheaded by 700 Russian Tanks, using Russian fuel, Russian ammunition.

The US had originally agreed to provide funding and military assistance by sending bombers if he North Invaded the South. This never eventuated due to Congress intervention.

The next chapter was the boat people fleeing persecution; the final chapter is yet to be written.

LEST WE FORGET

Watson Young
RNZAMC, (Vietnam Vet. 1973).

Content from internet.