

BLM 6 – LESSON 4

Thinking about the Vietnam War



Soldier

Protester

Vietnamese refugee

Soldier	Protester	Vietnamese refugee
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Top 10 questions I would like to ask people in Australia about their Vietnam War experience

BLM 7 – LESSON 4

Excerpts

Excerpt 1

Between 1962 and 1972 nearly 60 000 Australian men and women served in Vietnam. For many of the Australians, this was their first experience of Asia. They went into a place where the geography, economy, society, politics and social conditions of the country were all very different to what they knew at home.

Excerpt 2

The majority of Australian servicemen and women served in Phuoc Tuy province, south east of Saigon, and sometimes assisted in neighbouring provinces. The Australians were given this province to control because it allowed good access by air and sea, and so could be reinforced or evacuated easily if necessary.

Excerpt 3

Australia became deeply involved in the Vietnam War in 1965. On 29 April, Prime Minister Robert Menzies announced to Parliament that Australia would send combat troops to South Vietnam. Since 1962 Australia's involvement was a small number of Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV) advisers sent to train South Vietnamese troops and a Royal Australian Air Force Transport Flight from 1964, but this was to be a substantial increase in our military commitment.

Excerpt 4

The war in Vietnam has to be seen in a 'Cold War' context. The Cold War was a period from 1945 to 1991 of ideological conflict between capitalism/ democracy and communism — involving mainly the United States of America and its allies, and the Soviet Union and its allies.

Excerpt 5

In towns the conditions seemed crowded and, to the soldiers, quite unsanitary. All food was sold in the local market, and there was no refrigeration to protect meat and other perishables. Most soldiers did not speak more than a few words of Vietnamese and the high-pitched tonal sounds of the Vietnamese language sounded alien to the young Australian men. The people were mostly women, old men and children, with most military-eligible aged men off fighting in the South Vietnamese Army, or for the Viet Cong. There were few lasting personal contacts with the local people — this meant that there were no close bonds developed that might have given Australians greater insight into the Vietnamese people and way of life, but also reduced the inevitable friction that arises between foreign troops and locals when they are in close contact. While the purpose of the Australian force in Vietnam was ill-defined by the politicians, for most Australian servicemen and women their task was clear — to help these people live better and more secure lives.

Oral Histories Reader's Theatre Scripts

From Australians at War Film Archive - <http://www.australiansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au/aawfa/search.aspx>

Kevin Barker: Regular Army

Based in Vung Tau, the main Australian base and travelled all over South Vietnam virtually. I was in operations all over the place from right down the bottom end of South Vietnam right up to the large American base at Long Binh. I done operations out of there and then I was in a village for a couple of months doing driving and protecting of a civil aid mob, doing civil aid work. We were building a school for the local village and we were living in the South Vietnamese army compound in the village area. We did quite a bit of civil aid there and in Baria we rebuilt a few school rooms that the Vietcong had damaged. So if you want to start at the bottom base when we first arrived in Vietnam it is quite frightening at times and quite exciting because you get off the boat after ten days at sea and you get into the American Chinook helicopters and they are full of bullet holes. That sort of gives you bit of a thrill. We flew to Nui Dat and were in tent lines with sandbags all round.

Yvonne Bolton: Task Force, Nurses

I just froze: I couldn't believe it. And I thought how am I going to ever cope? But I suppose I did cope, I can't remember much about that. And then the rest of what I can remember is repeating of all of that you know? The sirens going and it didn't really matter if you were eating or sleeping or whatever you were doing. As soon as the sirens started you were there. And you know, the casualties were coming in and in 1969 when I went there was a lot of casualties coming in, and they were pretty severely injured, like loss of limb or the shrapnel would track right up through their bodies

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e, Regular Army, Commanders

One of the things that I used to impress on my troops was the need to respect the people and understand their customs. And as an example I insisted that instead of throwing lollies to kids, which Australian troops often do is, which causes them to scrabble in the dirt for them and it's a bit undignified, is to hand the sweets and so forth to the elders, maybe the parents, maybe schoolteachers, something like that so they can be distributed in a reasonable way.

Bill Hindson, Regular Army, SAS

The first I became aware of the army was when my uncle went to Korea and he left his uniform hanging in my wardrobe as a young kid, and I was very much taken with the uniform and the military in general. I thought it was very exciting stuff and he used to send back photos from Korea and from Japan when he went on leave. We arrived in Vietnam on 6th June 1965. We were on board the HMAS Sydney and we arrived off Cape St. Jacques, which the Australians later came to know as Vung Tau we found that over several nights the VC, the Viet Cong, were coming out of the tunnels... It was quite a significant operation and it gave us I think, one of our first tastes of a major battle and in that battle there were a lot of people were killed and it's sad ...