KIWIS UNDER FIRE:
THE NEW ZEALAND ARMED FORCES IN
SOUTH VIETNAM c. 1965-72

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GLOSSARY

1 ATF: 1st Australian Task Force
ANZAC: Australian and New Zealand Army Corps, first formed in World War One
ANZUS: Treaty signed in 1951 between Australia, New Zealand and the United States
ARVN: Army of the Republic of Vietnam
Aussie: Slang term for an Australian
Company: Tactical grouping of between 100-150 men
Digger: Slang term for an Australian soldier
DRV: Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam)
EEC: European Economic Community
FSB: Fire Support Base, a grouping of artillery and mortars
Kiwi: Slang term for a New Zealander
NZATTV: New Zealand Army Training Team Vietnam
NVA: North Vietnamese Army
PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam (communist)
RAR: Royal Australian Regiment, battalions of the RAR are abbreviated 1 RAR, 2 RAR etc.
RNZA: Royal New Zealand Artillery
RNZIR: Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment
RVN: Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)
SAS: Special Air Service
SEATO: South East Asian Treaty Organisation
TAOR: Tactical Area of Responsibility
VC: Viet Cong
Viet Cong: Military arm of the National Liberation Front
Viet Minh: Vietnamese Independence League, anti-colonial organisation which fought successful guerrilla wars against the Japanese and French
CHAPTER: ONE
BACKGROUND TO INVOLVEMENT

New Zealand was reluctant to be involved militarily in South Vietnam, partly because the Government believed that a foreign military solution to the Vietnamese situation was not possible, and partly because it was not convinced that a New Zealand contribution was really necessary, given the great resources of its allies.¹

New Zealand’s military commitment was always at a token level, despite the rhetoric used to justify the aid. Following the Second World War New Zealand’s foreign policy became subject to new international demands. The war in Vietnam caused these demands to critically converge and cause an unwilling government to act against its better judgement and commit land forces to the Vietnam theatre.

One of the most influential factors behind the decision to commit forces was the general belief that the active participation of the United States in the Pacific was vital to New Zealand’s future security. It was therefore considered that the maintenance of close relations with the United States should be a top priority and would necessarily involve a firm commitment to US regional security policies. The United States had also become an important export market for New Zealand and a vital source of international finance for the development of export diversification and internal infrastructure projects.² This belief was reinforced by the notion that given the existing Communist governments in South East Asia, any increase in Communism in this region would pose a strategic threat to New Zealand’s interests. Another factor of considerable influence in New Zealand’s foreign policy was the growing importance of the relationship with Australia and the habit of Trans-Tasman co-operation in defence and security matters. The looming prospect of Britain becoming a member of the EEC meant that by the early 1960s the relationship with Australia had developed a vital economic and trading angle.³

³ McCraw, p.49.
New Zealand had not ignored developments in South East Asia following the defeat of the Japanese in the Second World War. The New Zealand government had offered support and sympathy to the French efforts against the Vietminh. In September 1952 New Zealand expressed its support by shipping a large quantity of arms and ammunition to the French free of charge. By the beginning of the 1960s the problem of greatest concern to the Western Allies in South East Asia was the increasing communist insurgency in South Vietnam. This insurgency was thought to be inspired, funded and even directed by the communist regimes of China and North Vietnam.

New Zealand Aid to Vietnam

In November 1961 the Kennedy Administration announced its decision to substantially increase US aid to South Vietnam, and it was eager to enlist the direct support of its allies in this action. The ANZUS Council meeting of May 1962 was used by the US delegation as an opportunity to canvass the support of the other member countries for a public display of support for the US stance on Vietnam. What was being sought by the US was allied aid for the South Vietnamese Government. Australia responded with an offer of military advisers, New Zealand responded with caution and no contributions were forthcoming. It was only after the Council meeting and subsequent Cabinet briefing by the visiting US Secretary of State on security issues in South East Asia, that the Prime Minister announced a New Zealand contribution was to be 'discussed'.

It was not until August 1962 that a decision was announced. Instead of the expected military unit, a civilian surgical team was to be sent. The Prime Minister made it quite clear the emphasis was to be on non-military assistance and stressed "New Zealand should, I think, examine the possibility of further assistance under the Colombo Plan." The South Vietnamese, (and no doubt the Americans) sought a military commitment from New Zealand. In November 1962 the visiting South Vietnamese Foreign Minister indicated his government's desire for New Zealand to bring its contribution into line with that of Australia and send a military training team. This request was repeated by the South Vietnamese Ambassador in May 1963. The New Zealand Government's


5 McCraw, p.51.

6 Jackson, p.58.

7 McCraw, p.51.

8 Report of the Department of External Affairs (RDEA), 1962, p.6
standard response to such requests was to promise to "keep the possibility of meeting this request under review".9

On the final day of the June 1963 ANZUS Council meeting, Holyoake announced that New Zealand would 'probably' send a small team of service personnel to South Vietnam in a non-combat role. Holyoake was careful to emphasise that long term peace in Vietnam could only be achieved by the efforts of the Vietnamese themselves. He forcefully added "In this struggle we are not asked to undertake combat duties; this has not been asked. And it would not be appropriate."10 Nevertheless, Holyoake was willing to later concede that it was 'the need for allied solidarity in supporting the people of South Vietnam' that had finally persuaded the Government to send a small military team.11 As McCraw succinctly states, "It was not, then, the need of South Vietnam for the team so much as the need of the Americans for political support that New Zealand had met." 12

The continued political turmoil in South Vietnam and the inability of its corrupt leaders to quell popular sentiment was a key element in the inaction of the New Zealand government in implementing its decision to send a service team to Vietnam. Facing a general election in November, the Holyoake government was not willing to undertake a political step that was so potentially volatile. While Holyoake remained Prime Minister after November, by the beginning of 1964 new Presidents had taken office in both the US and South Vietnam. The new US President stressed the need for greater Allied support for the new South Vietnamese regime. A note passed to the Australian government called for a joint New Zealand, Australian and British force comprising of army and airforce training personnel, pilots, reconnaissance aircraft, communications engineers, and medical and dental teams.13 It was not until May 1964 that Prime Minister Holyoake announced a non-civilian contribution to South Vietnam in the form of a team of army engineers. The role of the engineers was clearly stated by the government as that of civic aid and that a combat role by New Zealand was inappropriate, a view shared by the opposition.14 This

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9 McCraw, p.51.

10 External Affairs Review (EAR), June 1963, p.27.


12 McCraw, p.52.


14 McCraw, p.53.
declaration was quickly followed by an Australian announcement of increased aid.\textsuperscript{15} Holyoake was later to claim that New Zealand had made the contribution at the request of the April 1964 SEATO Council and played down South Vietnam's request as of secondary importance.\textsuperscript{16} The decision to send the engineers was greeted with warmth by the United States and at the July 1964 ANZUS Council meeting the US expressed its satisfaction that "The members of ANZUS had increased their assistance to the Republic of Vietnam since the SEATO Council meeting."\textsuperscript{17}

**New Zealand, the US and Vietnam**

Meanwhile in October Johnson had appointed a task force the job of drawing up political and military options for direct action against North Vietnam. Three final alternatives were recommended: Firstly for the US to react with reprisal bombing raids; the second called for a high pressure large scale and systematic bombing without respite; and finally for a gradually escalating bombing campaign.\textsuperscript{18} On December 1st 1964 Johnson approved the first option with hopes that the Saigon Government could achieve some semblance of stability in the near future which would allow a gradual escalation of the bombing and favourably increase the negotiating position. The President also called for 'new, dramatic and effective' assistance from the Allies especially Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the Philippines.\textsuperscript{19} The standard procedure followed by the US in obtaining Allied military units for Vietnam involved sounding out the target country as to willingness to commit. A list of the units most needed by the US military was then sent to the target government for them to select what they were willing to commit. Once that had been completed, the South Vietnamese Government would make a formal request from the target country for the particular unit already chosen.\textsuperscript{20}

The New Zealand government had reservations about the US Vietnam policy from the very beginning. This was a belief that was retained throughout the course of the conflict. The attitude of the New Zealand government is clearly spelled out by R. M. Mullins of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who wrote in the July 1972 Foreign Affairs Review:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} McCraw, p.52.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Barclay, p.45.
\item \textsuperscript{17} EAR, July 1964, p.54.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Barclay, p.69.
\item \textsuperscript{20} McCraw, p.54.
\end{itemize}
In South Vietnam the Viet Cong had made steady and considerable progress partly because of the continuing political instability in Saigon, while the South Vietnamese military and political leaders had failed to provide effective leadership or win the allegiance of the population. The prospect in the South was for continued instability and, until more stability was achieved, external assistance could prevent a collapse but not lead to a significant improvement in the security situation. We recognised that the most that external assistance could do would be to buy time for the South Vietnamese themselves to show better results. We were under no illusions that air attacks in the North would lead to a significant reduction in support from North Vietnam for operations in the South or incline Hanoi towards negotiations. We did not assess that China would seek to become involved in war with the United States but saw that there was some risk that it might. We were therefore extremely cautious about what could be achieved by the introduction of allied ground forces, believing that this could change the nature of the war and must lead on to the committal of very considerable forces.

New Zealand was equally doubtful about the advisability of committing ground troops to Vietnam, in contrast to its neighbour across the Tasman. McCraw states that the New Zealand government was moved to criticise the nature of both US policy and the Saigon government. New Zealand claimed the success of the Viet Cong was directly attributable to the lack of leadership and direction in Saigon. Increasing commitment of men and material support from the United States would be required to prop up the Saigon regime and that it would be impossible for an outside agent such as the US Government to try and create a viable political structure in South Vietnam, especially one that could wield popular support. New Zealand could see no justification for ground forces and would not support such a move.

The Australian Attitude to Vietnam
The Australian Government did not share the same concerns as New Zealand. Glen St J. Barclay gives some insight into the thinking behind Australia's Vietnam policy of the period. He comments:

The fact of the matter was that the Australian government was not primarily concerned with providing aid to Vietnam. What it was primarily concerned with was establishing a sense of mutual alliance with the United States. It was the gratitude of Washington that was being sought, not that of Saigon. Securing a viable, non-communist government in South Vietnam would not in itself necessarily solve

22 McCraw, p.55.
Australia's security problems. Only securing an American military commitment in Vietnam, it was assumed, would do that, and this could best be achieved by sending the kind of assistance the Americans wanted, whether the Vietnamese had asked for it or not.  

In the period that followed the Australian Government gave Washington encouraging signs that it was prepared to commit ground troops as soon as the Americans gave the nod. McCraw claims that in January 1965 the Australian Government tried to persuade the US government to begin an all-out bombing campaign, with the promise of full diplomatic support. This was in spite of the American decision against any further military escalation until more political stability was achieved in Saigon. New Zealand at first rebuffed US attempts on February 20th to inaugurate joint staff talks on possible ground troop commitment. Despite the fact that the Australians agreed to the proposal on February 24th, New Zealand continued to rebuff the idea until March 2nd. The joint US-Australia-New Zealand staff talks were finally held in Honolulu on March 31st. The significant motivation behind the New Zealand Government's reluctance to become involved in a ground war resided in the sheer physical practicalities. New Zealand troops were heavily committed in Malaya at a substantial financial cost. In 1965 New Zealand's regular army comprised just 5,374 soldiers, only half of these were actual front-line fighting units. An infantry battalion and a commando unit was already deployed in Malaysia, leaving a reserve of approximately 9,000 part-time Territorial troops, most of whom were national servicemen.  

The Decision to Commit New Zealand Military Forces  

On the 8th March 1965 United States Marine Corps Battalion Landing Team 3/9 landed on the beaches of South Vietnam with the official task of guarding Da Nang Air base from Viet Cong attack. Johnson's recruitment campaign for allied support moved into full swing. National Security Action memorandum 328 dated April 1st records:

The President approved the urgent exploration with the Korean, Australian and New Zealand governments, of the possibility of rapid

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23 Barclay, p.54.  
24 McCraw, p.56.  
25 McCraw, p.56.  
27 Barclay, p.91.
deployment of significant combat elements of their armed forces in parallel with additional marine deployments.\textsuperscript{28}  

Soundings of these governments led to an informal agreement by both South Korea and Australia on April 3rd to send combat troops to Vietnam. New Zealand was absent from the agreement and continued to express concern at the latest developments.\textsuperscript{29} By this stage the Australians had already deployed 100 combat advisers, a 73-man RAAF unit with 6 Caribou transport aircraft as well as an 8-man surgical team with a civilian support crew. The Koreans had recently increased their forces and now had a 130-man Mobile Army Surgical Team, 10 Taekwando instructors and the first 600 engineers and guards out of a promised 2000-man taskforce in the field in Vietnam. In contrast, New Zealand had a 25-man army engineering team and a 6-man surgical unit.\textsuperscript{30}  

New Zealand's lack of enthusiasm had not gone unnoticed by the US Government. Secretary of State Dean Rusk instructed New Zealand Ambassador George Laking that the "...Australians had given strong indication GOA [Government of Australia] would be willing send infantry battalion to SVN [South Vietnam] if we and GVN [government of Vietnam] request".\textsuperscript{31} According to Rusk, Laking questioned whether the US envisaged an international force in Vietnam. He further stated that the New Zealand Government would need a detailed explanation of the US Government's concept of the nature of the force New Zealand would participate in and the role the New Zealand element would play. Laking warned Rusk that he "...could not say with certainty what the response [of the New Zealand Government] would be."\textsuperscript{32}  

McCraw is of the opinion that New Zealand's reluctance towards further commitment in Vietnam stemmed not so much from a fundamental opposition to US military involvement, as from a lack of conviction about the necessity of a New Zealand combat contribution. In the view of the New Zealand Government the United States had adequate financial and military resources to deal with the situation in Vietnam. New Zealand quite clearly did not have enough of either to make any real difference whether or not it sent troops. Keith Jackson draws attention to the serious balance of payments problem the New Zealand Government was suffering and which it continued

\textsuperscript{28} Sheehan, et. al., p.445.  
\textsuperscript{29} McCraw, p.57.  
\textsuperscript{30} Barclay, p.93.  
\textsuperscript{31} Barclay, p.101.  
\textsuperscript{32} Barclay, p.101.
to suffer throughout the 1960s. In an interview by McCraw, the Deputy Prime Minister of the time J. R. Marshall points to the Australian decision to commit troops as being the decisive factor in the timing of a similar New Zealand offer to the US. Nevertheless, New Zealand had still made no decision by the time President Johnson's special envoy Henry Cabot Lodge arrived on April 19th. It took that extra push from the US before New Zealand was persuaded to act.

Keith Jackson concurs with Marshall's assessment on the influence of Australian actions on New Zealand's decision. Jackson comments:

> Once Australia had committed troops, New Zealand's position became politically embarrassing. To have refused might have complicated relations not only with the United States but also with Australia.

Jackson also notes the importance of the New Zealand-Australia Free Trade Area agreement which was signed on 31st August 1965 as a factor in the Government's decision to join her ANZUS allies in the Vietnam fray.

On 20th April Lodge met with Holyoake and other senior ministers, leading to Cabinet agreement in principle to send a combat unit to Vietnam. The US Government was not to be informed exactly what New Zealand intended to send until after the Minister of Defence had made his recommendation. Domestically the government did not expect a great deal of opposition to the decision to send combat forces to Vietnam. As Holyoake stated on 13th May 1965, "If we are not prepared to play our part now, can we in good conscience expect our allies to help later on?"

It was not until May 10th that the New Zealand government received a formal request for combat troops from the Government of South Vietnam. The public announcement of the government's decision to send an artillery battery to Vietnam was delayed until the opening of the 1965 Parliamentary session on 27th May.

Keith Holyoake informed the House that in light of the request from the Prime Minister of South Vietnam for New Zealand to send combatant troops to his country, the Government had decided to send an artillery battery to Vietnam to serve alongside

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34 McCraw, p.57.

35 McCraw, p.58.

36 Keith Jackson, "New Zealand and Southeast Asia", p.7.

37 Keith Jackson, "New Zealand and Southeast Asia," p.17.

the Australian forces already committed. Holyoake was careful to establish that the defence of Malaysia remained the first priority of the Government and that the dispatch of the artillery unit in no way diminished New Zealand's ability to remain effective in this area. It was also announced that the New Zealand engineers currently engaged in civic construction work were to be withdrawn when the artillery arrived.\textsuperscript{39}

Holyoake justified the committal of troops on three basic developments. Firstly, he cited the worsening situation in South Vietnam and the stepping up of American military assistance to Saigon. He secondly placed importance on the Australian decision to send an infantry battalion, perhaps in acknowledgement of the pressure this had placed on New Zealand to act in concert with its ANZUS allies. The final factor he referred to was the formal request by the South Vietnamese government for military support, a weak excuse considering the behind the scenes diplomacy that went into producing such a request.\textsuperscript{40} Holyoake asserted:

...New Zealand's first line of defence is in South-East Asia... the war in Vietnam is not a civil war or a popular uprising... It is ruthless Communist aggression directed and supplied by Communist North Vietnam and openly encouraged, supported and partly supplied by Communist China... The fact is that events in Vietnam threaten New Zealand just as much as events in Malaysia, and indeed at this stage probably more so.\textsuperscript{41}

Holyoake received support from his deputy, J. R. Marshall, on the moral and humanitarian aspects of New Zealand's military aid to Vietnam. Marshall was not unwilling to refer to the practical political gains of the decision and that such diplomatic favour could be secured at a small price. He stated to the House:

Our contribution is small in this particular sphere but useful and effective alongside that of our allies, and particularly alongside the Australian infantry battalion. The main value is of course its moral force. It shows were we stand.\textsuperscript{42}

Marshall's optimism was misguided on at least one point however. In response to the Labour opposition criticism that this action would involve New Zealand in the escalation of the war, Marshall assured them:

In Korea we went in with an artillery regiment and remained with that contribution throughout the Korean campaign. I believe the

\textsuperscript{39} New Zealand Parliamentary Debates (NZPD), 1965, vol. 342, p.2.
\textsuperscript{40} NZPD, 1965, vol. 342, p.8.
same situation will apply here, and that we will not - unless it is considered that course should be followed - be required, as the Leader of the Opposition fears, to go in with greater forces.43

A recently declassified White House memorandum dated 28th June 1965 gives an interesting insight into Holyoake's own assessment of the Vietnam situation. The memorandum details a conversation held between Holyoake, Johnson, William Bundy and the US and New Zealand Ambassadors on the subject of New Zealand forces in Vietnam. When asked by the President about the domestic reaction to the decision to deploy combat troops, the memorandum records:

The Prime Minister responded that the man in the street had only a very dim idea of what Vietnam stood for, but implied that the government would take a different view... The Prime Minister said that New Zealand opinion seemed to be moving in a more favourable direction, although the overwhelming bulk of the New Zealand people were emotionally opposed to any war, and it took a good deal to replace this emotion by the logic of the situation. He said that leading newspapers were now generally behind the government, although they had some trouble with universities and the clergy. He said that there should be no doubt that the government itself was 100% in accord with US policy. The Prime Minister referred again to the New Zealand battery, [161 Battalion] and said that it was of very high quality and, he added with some pride, had better equipment than the Australians.44

Despite Holyoake's optimistic assessment of his domestic support and his great belief in the superiority of the New Zealand military, he was cautious enough to follow a policy of 'minimum commitment'. This policy drew criticism from those who opposed any form of New Zealand involvement in Vietnam. At the same time, the Government's claim that Vietnam presented a vital security threat drew adverse comments from those that felt that due to the serious nature of this threat the Government should do more than send a token military force.

Holyoake followed up the May announcement that New Zealand would send an artillery unit to Vietnam, with the proposal at the June 1965 Commonwealth Prime Ministers Conference that the Viet Cong should be included in any peace negotiations. At the same conference he strongly backed negotiation and pressed vigorously for a further pause in air strikes against North Vietnam until the Harold Wilson led


Commonwealth peace mission had been proven to be a failure.\textsuperscript{45} The New Zealand Prime Minister caused further embarrassment to the US Government later in the year when he stated:

\begin{quote}
We are not fighting Communism as an ideology (as one might oppose, say, existentialism as an ideology) but the fact of Communist aggression. If - and I repeat if - the people of Vietnam freely chose Communism - of any variety - that would be their business.\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

In the months preceding the final decision to send troops to Vietnam, the Defence Secretary Jack Hunn protested strongly against any further New Zealand involvement. In a controversial memo sent by Hunn to the acting Defence Minister Ralph Hanan, Hunn spelt out precisely his concerns about New Zealand's future Vietnam policy. After reading the memo which contained Hunn's eight points against a New Zealand military commitment, Hanan is alleged to have been so enraged that he flushed it down the toilet.\textsuperscript{47} Hunn's main argument was that the New Zealand resources available for use in Vietnam were so small as to be next to useless within the wider Vietnam context. He argued:

\begin{quote}
If we are trying to establish a moral claim to US protection when New Zealand itself is directly threatened in maybe 15-20 years' time, will Congress remember then that we put a small detachment into Vietnam in 1965?\textsuperscript{48}
\end{quote}

In his view the greatest problem facing the New Zealand Government was the Australian attitude towards the war. Hunn continues:

\begin{quote}
Admittedly gratuitous participation by Australia could be embarrassing to New Zealand, but embarrassment alone is not a good reason for going to war. Australian and New Zealand interests are not always identical... Moreover, New Zealand capabilities are
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{46} EAR, December 1965, p.16.


much more limited than Australia's. We cannot match everything they do. And we have the sovereign right to decide for ourselves.49

It was this 'sovereign right' that was to be severely tested in the years to follow.

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CHAPTER: TWO
FROM LIMITED COMMITMENT TO GRADUAL ESCALATION

New Zealand's military aid must be small. But was it not so in Malaya and Korea or even in the Second World War, when measured against the overall forces? It will, we may be sure, prove useful and effective. It will have political value out of all proportion to its size. It will show we are not fair weather friends. It will show we value our treaty obligations and intend to meet them. And that we intend to play our full part in measures for collective self defence in South-East Asia.\(^{50}\)

The first New Zealand unit to be designated for combat service in South Vietnam was the 120-man strong 161 Battery Royal New Zealand Artillery (161 Battalion). From the outset considerations other than military were to play a decisive and often restricting role in the effectiveness and character of this force. There were various reasons why an artillery battery was chosen by the government. Firstly, the Australians had stated their preference for a field battery to support their infantry battalion. It also made both military and political sense to co-operate with the Australians. In addition, the L5 pack howitzers with which 161 was equipped were considered to be the best of all field guns used by the Allied armies and ideal for use in the Vietnam due to their portability.\(^{51}\) Most important of all as far as the Government was concerned, was the fact that the artillery battery fulfilled all the political requirements of the time. Artillery was small, relatively cheap, unlikely to suffer high casualties and its deployment would not seriously reduce the strength of New Zealand's force in Malaysia.\(^{52}\) Former Chief of Defence Staff and Ambassador to Vietnam, Lt. General Sir Leonard Thornton, explains the military reasoning behind sending artillery to Vietnam:

An artillery unit is not involved in the day-to-day melee with the infantry. They can at least stand back a little bit from the battle and


\(^{52}\) MacGibbon, p.17.
have some independent role. There can be some tactical control of their involvement.\textsuperscript{53}

\textbf{Military Preparations}

The original Battery stationed at Papakura comprised a six-gun strong force manned by a mix of regular and territorial troops. This force had been substantially reorganised in February 1965 for use in airborne operations in Borneo and as such had been pared down to a four-gun unit. It was this 'Borneo Design Battery' that was subsequently chosen by the government to serve in Vietnam, the logic being that what was appropriate for rainforested Borneo would be equally suitable for rainforested Vietnam.\textsuperscript{54} What was even more attractive to the government was the reduced cost of the smaller unit. This was of great importance as the additional costs associated with Vietnam had to be absorbed within the existing defence budget. As it was, 161 Battalion's final ammunition bill alone came to $8 million dollars.\textsuperscript{55}

The report on the Chief of General Staff's 1972 exercise states "It was most unfortunate that the 161st Battery only mounted four guns."\textsuperscript{56} Lieutenant S. D. Newman explains the 'unfortunate' nature of this decision:

The dispatching of the 'Borneo Design Battery' to Vietnam met with considerable opposition from its drafters. They considered the Borneo design inappropriate for the Vietnam theatre and the methods of operation likely to be called for in the Viet Cong infested regions of South Vietnam. In their opinion the single gun deployments, common in Borneo and catered for in their organisation for that theatre, would be far too hazardous in South Vietnam because of the numbers of active Viet Cong around the capital city of Saigon.\textsuperscript{57}

The blame cannot be placed entirely at the feet of the politicians. The New Zealand Army made a serious error in relying on an Australian reconnaissance report which stated that the US 173D Airborne Brigade with which 161 was to integrate was supported by four gun batteries.\textsuperscript{58} This later proved to be false, the Americans used standard six gun batteries which not only meant that 161 was understrength but that it


\textsuperscript{54} Breen, p.67.

\textsuperscript{55} MacGibbon, p.38.

\textsuperscript{56} MacGibbon, p.16.


\textsuperscript{58} MacGibbon, p.16.
also broke the homogenous nature of 173D Brigade's batteries. It was only after the four-gun concept had been submitted to the Government that the error was discovered. The Government proved to be unsympathetic to the Army's attempts to rectify the error due to the extra costs involved.

Initially there was some indecision as to where in South Vietnam the Australian and New Zealand forces should operate. The first option was to deploy the ANZAC force in Da Nang where US Marines had been stationed since March. Eventually it was agreed that the Australian forces would be placed under the operational control of the 173rd Airborne Brigade at Bien Hoa. The 173rd had only two battalions and it was thought that the Australian battalion would be useful in bringing the unit up to full strength for ground-based operations. The Australian battalion completed its deployment by June 10th and was joined by the 161st Battery Royal Regiment of the New Zealand Artillery in July.

Deployment in Vietnam

The problems that 161 faced in New Zealand continued once it arrived in Bien Hoa. The greatest military value of 161 was thought to be in its ability to be easily deployed by air. This was due to the nature of its light L5 pack howitzer: a near complete L5 could be carried by an Iroquois helicopter unlike the heavier M2A2 guns used by the US. As such, 161 was only lightly equipped with vehicles, transport by air being the expected method of deployment. However, during the first training session it was found that due to the lesser air density of tropical Vietnam and the fact that the US Iroquois helicopters carried two machine gunners and two pilots as standard, the lifting capacity of the helicopter was so reduced that it would take four trips to transport the gun, its detachment and 25 rounds of ammunition. This time delay and the exposure to enemy fire was considered unacceptable, especially as at the time of 161's arrival in Vietnam there was a shortage of helicopters. As a consequence, deployments were undertaken by road, the L5 thus lost its tactical advantage and the Battery's underpowered Landrovers became severely overworked.

The Battery became the focus of controversy back in New Zealand within its first weeks of gunnery practice. New Zealand press reports indicated that Battery Commander Major Don Kenning had employed and fired an agreed-upon 'spare' fifth gun in disregard of instructions to the contrary. Chris Turver was the correspondent that had first covered the story for the New Zealand Press Association. In recalling the controversy surrounding the incident he remembers:

59 Breen, p.10.
60 Newman p.33.
61 MacGibbon, p.71.
A few days later a cable came from Keith Holyoake to the commander of the New Zealanders telling him to order Turver to stop calling it a five-gun battery and to confine himself to calling it a four-gun battery because the fifth was supposed to be spare. So, the political scene, even at that distance, was still fairly heavy and you had to watch what you were doing. The government was extremely conscious of what it had told people and tried to maintain the picture it had painted.62

In response to questions from an irate Prime Minister, Kenning tried to justify his actions by claiming he was merely testing the gun's reliability and providing training for the Battery's cooks and drivers who would possibly be used to man guns in an emergency. However, as Kenning would later accept, he used the fifth gun as he would any other, his view being that it would be irresponsible for an understrength battery to let a gun stand idle in the heat of battle.63 The Prime Minister did not pursue the matter further, perhaps because of the praise 161 had received from General Westmoreland, Commander of US Forces in Vietnam, and because of Australian moves to place their own battery in Bien Hoa.

Indeed it was at this point that the spirit of ANZAC co-operation both at the political and military level began to fray and never quite recovered. In August 1965 the Australian Government announced, without consultation with the New Zealand Government, that it would be sending an Australian Battery to join 1 Battalion Royal Australian Regiment (1 RAR) in Bien Hoa. With the arrival of the Australian battery much of the rationale behind 161's deployment in Vietnam was negated and it now found itself in competition with the Australian battery for artillery support of 1 RAR. It was feared that 1 RAR would opt for the Australian battery due to Australian criticism of the New Zealand deployment of a four-gun battery, particularly since it was Australian and not New Zealand infantry that could be put at risk through inadequate artillery support. It was only when the Australian Government refused to allow 161 to operate within the 1st Australian Task Force in 1966 that the battalion was brought up to six-gun strength.64 The Australian deployment caused the troops further chagrin as it was felt it had extinguished the newly rekindled ANZAC spirit of 161 and 1 RAR. This had a special significance as 161's parent unit, the 16th Field Regiment, had supported 1 RAR during the Korean War.65

63 Newman p.34.
64 Breen, p.107.
65 Breen, p.68.
It was also a setback in more practical military terms. The 161 Battalion was confined to the Bien Hoa area when not in support of 1 RAR at a time when the 173D Airborne Brigade was operating further afield. The general support tasks that consequently fell upon 161 were poorly suited for its highly mobile but limited gun. The resentment that the Australian action caused is well illustrated by the rather terse Report on the Chief of General Staff's Exercise 1972 summation of the Australian decision to send a battery to Bien Hoa. It comments:

It was quite clear at this time that although New Zealand may have been looking for an ANZAC orientation in its contribution, Australia was primarily concerned with developing a viable, nationally identifiable force.

**Morale**

The loss of the supporting role to 1 RAR certainly dealt a blow to the morale of 161 but was not the only factor that contributed to general lowering of the Battalion's spirit. The two most continuous and bitter sources of grievance amongst the troops were pay and length of active service. Unmarried men were required to serve an 18 month tour of service in Vietnam while their married counterparts had to serve only 9 months. This became a source of friction within the unit itself and was not finally resolved until a standard 12 month tour of duty was implemented. Pay was another grumble: soldiers under the age of 19 years were placed on lower 'youth rates' and the other soldiers were subject to the same pay and tax rate as their comrades back in New Zealand, despite the fact that they were on active service. This was particularly hard to take as both the Australians and Americans were far more generous to their troops, something the New Zealanders were made keenly aware of.

**The Creation of the 1st Australian Task Force**

In March 1966 Australia announced that it would deploy a two battalion Task Force supported by a regiment of artillery. After discussion with General Westmoreland it was decided that this task force should have the operational responsibility for Phuoc Tuy province. The New Zealand government was faced with the choice of staying in

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66 Breen, p.67.
67 MacGibbon, p.17.
68 Breen, p.107.
69 Newman, p.41.
70 Nelson, p.23.
71 MacGibbon, p.18.
Bien Hoa with the Americans or joining the 1st Australian Task Force (1 ATF) in Phuoc Tuy. There were certain military and political advantages in joining the Australians. The ANZAC relationship was of particular significance to the New Zealand public and the training and tactics of 161 were similar to those of the Australians. The continued association with the Australians made sense in terms of pure military practicality due to the relative compatibility of New Zealand and Australian equipment. To continue to operate in an American environment would have meant an almost total refit of the Battery. The only real argument for staying in Bien Hoa was the concern, widely held within the New Zealand military, that New Zealand's contribution would be overshadowed by her larger cousin within the Task Force environment. Nevertheless, practical considerations won out and in June 1966 161 Battery moved to join the Australians in Phuoc Tuy, though it appears the move caused bitterness within the New Zealand military establishment. MacGibbon's report concludes:

New Zealand went along readily enough, therefore, even though there had been little or no consultation regarding the Australian decision to take over responsibility for one area, or the relative merits or demerits of Phuoc Tuy Province as such an area.

Phuoc Tuy

Phuoc Tuy province was situated to the east of Saigon and had a population of around 100,000. A major rubber industry had been established under the French and over 16,000 acres of land had been converted into rubber plantations. The terrain was described by one Australian soldier as being:

...a rich farm area dotted with villages and hamlets, [as well as] a long coastline, a complex delta area of mangrove swamps and numerous canals and channels, isolated ranges of very rugged mountains and a large area of virtually uninhabited jungle containing all the most loathsome combinations of thorny bamboos, poisonous snakes, insects, malaria, dense underbrush, swamps and rugged ground conditions that the most dedicated guerrilla warfare expert could ask for. It was also... within less than forty miles of the national capital.

72 MacGibbon, p.18.

73 MacGibbon, p.18.


The benefits of Phuoc Tuy as an area for guerrilla operations had not been lost on the enemy and by early 1966 all of the province was heavily infiltrated by the Communist forces. The Viet Cong had established large bases in the northern half of the province and had become brazen in their attacks on South Vietnamese Government forces stationed in the provincial capital of Baria. It must be asked why Phuoc Tuy, with all its seeming disadvantages, was chosen by the Australians as the base for I ATF? In short, it fitted all the correct military and political criteria. Phuoc Tuy did not border the dangerous areas of Cambodia, Laos or the demilitarised zone and possessed the strategically valuable port of Vung Tau. It was also an area that had been free of significant US operations and one in which the Task Force could operate in relative autonomy. The autonomy of the Task Force was paramount to the aims of the Australian government in the promotion of Australian, as opposed to US, military and political concepts of counter-insurgency warfare.

Expansion of New Zealand's Military Commitment

The formation of the 1 AFT came at a time when political developments within the region caused questions to be asked about New Zealand's future Vietnam policy. The primary concern was the expanding commitment of New Zealand's Vietnam Allies. The New Zealand Government felt an obligation to follow suit and likewise increase its forces in Vietnam. By this time the Indonesian-Malaysian crisis was cooling and New Zealand's future role in Malaysia and Singapore had to be examined in light of the uncertainty about Britain's future commitment to Southeast Asia. Any further expansion of New Zealand's military effort in Vietnam would be at the expense of forces stationed in Malaysia and would therefore be politically sensitive both diplomatically and domestically. The New Zealand Government had to also consider the growing international opposition to US and Allied involvement in Vietnam which had become vocal at home.

Prime Minister Holt's announcement in December 1966 that Australia would increase its overall forces in Vietnam to 6,300 intensified the pressure on the New Zealand Government to consider troop increases of its own. Coinciding with Holt's February 1967 visit to New Zealand, the Army Board conducted a study of the possibilities for

(Summer 1994) p.97.

79 Barclay, p.149.
increased troop commitment. The most obvious and convenient option was the transport of New Zealand units serving in the Commonwealth Strategic Reserve in Malaysia to Vietnam. An infantry battalion was ruled out because it would require the use of conscripted forces which was thought to be politically unacceptable. As an alternative a rifle company and SAS troop were finally recommended to cabinet. The Government decided that one company of the 1st Battalion Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment (1 RNZIR) accompanied by a small administrative group would be sent to Vietnam along with a combined Armed Services medical team. The 210 man rifle company was dubbed 'Victor Company' (V Coy) and was deployed in April 1967. It was placed under the operational control of the 2nd Battalion Royal Australian Regiment (2 RAR). In announcing the decision to increase New Zealand's forces in Vietnam, Prime Minister Holyoake stated:

After the most careful consideration, the Government has decided that, now that it is in a position to do so, New Zealand ought to make a further contribution to the allied military effort in defence of South Vietnam against North Vietnamese aggression... We continue firm in the view that the problems of Vietnam cannot be solved by military means alone... The Government is fully aware of the limitations on New Zealand's military capacity but is convinced that within those limits New Zealand's obligations and interests require that we do what we can in the collective effort. Now that the focus of military activity in Vietnam is beginning to turn to operations designed not only to clear but also to hold the ground that has been won, there is a need for more forces, especially infantry. The Government has no doubt therefore that these additional New Zealand forces will make a valuable contribution.

Holyoake's remarks about the 'limitations on New Zealand's military capacity' and his reaffirmation of his Government's belief that military means could not ultimately solve Vietnam's problems was not in line with what New Zealand's Allies were touting. The New Zealand Government was beginning to experience difficulties with the military and political demands of Vietnam.

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80 MacGibbon, p.23.
81 MacGibbon, p.25.
Logistics

The arrival of New Zealand infantry added considerable stress to an already stretched logistical supply system. New Zealand forces had always fought as expeditionary forces and in conjunction with a much larger ally. Even though this historical pattern was being repeated in Vietnam, the logistical supply of New Zealand forces represented a considerable financial, military, administrative and political headache. As former Chief of Defence Staff Lt. General Sir Thornton explains:

We put in a very small force, it had to be under somebody's operational command, and it was clearly not going to be the New Zealand government. On the other hand we didn't have the logistic and administrative backup to provide hospitals and transportation and ammunition and rations... and if we relied on somebody else for those things, then we were going to be dependent upon them for command. So it was a difficult situation for the New Zealand government to face. 84

The New Zealand military had operated within the British logistic system in its previous overseas endeavours and integration within an American system was something that posed new challenges. The fact that New Zealand relied on British equipment added to this difficulty. While steps had been taken in previous years to standardise with the Australian army (which had begun procuring US hardware), the level of standardisation was far from what was desired. Much of the blame can be attributed to the New Zealand Government's reluctance to spend scarce foreign currency on military hardware, the Army being instructed to 'buy guns where the country sold its butter', i.e. Britain. 85 There was a significant variance in equipment between New Zealand and Australia but the difference was minor when compared with that of New Zealand and the US.

To extract the maximum political mileage the New Zealand Government had insisted that New Zealand must 'pay its own way' in Vietnam. Indeed New Zealand and Australia stood alone among the allies in paying the full cost of their participation. 86 This decision imposed a severe constraint on the New Zealand military as the New Zealand effort in Vietnam had to be financed within the bounds of the existing Defence budget. The very generous US offers of equipment were rejected for political rather than military reasons. 87

84 Nelson, p.23.
85 MacGibbon, p.40.
86 Barclay, p.146.
87 MacGibbon, p.41.
Initially 161 battalion was intended to operate within a US logistic system. A small New Zealand logistic support element had been integrated within the Australian 1st Logistic Support Company and a formal 'Military Working Agreement' was reached with the Americans. The creation of 1 ATF and the arrival of the infantry rendered this arrangement unworkable. New Zealand forces were obliged to integrate into a predominantly Australian but also partially American logistical environment. It became necessary to draw up a comprehensive, if complicated, financial working arrangement with the Australian army and to amend the existing agreement with the US. The final arrangement agreed that the New Zealand Army would use as far as possible the Australian logistic system and attempt to standardise its equipment with Australia. Worn out or lost equipment was to be replaced by equivalent Australian items. In addition a three tiered payment system was set in place with New Zealand paying directly for items valued over $A 1000 (plus a 15% accessorl charge), and a per capita charge for lesser items of $A 47 per New Zealand soldier per month. New Zealand was also required to pay the cost of hiring Australian M2A2 howitzer guns, which in March 1967 had replaced the smaller L5 guns in 161 Battalion.

This arrangement found initial favour with both the New Zealand and Australian authorities. New Zealand did not have to provide an expensive logistic system of its own for such a small force and Australia's own logistic system was made more cost effective through greater utilisation.

One episode proved to be particularly embarrassing for the New Zealand Government. In late 1967 the Government, responding to a Treasury report that found that 161 battery was using less ammunition than was being paid for under the per capita system, demanded a change to 'Actual Rates' payment. Immediately after, the Tet offensive broke out resulting in protracted and massive ammunition expenditure. The Australians, much pleased with the financial windfall that the New Zealand decision had given them, were not receptive to the pleas of the New Zealand Government to change back to the cheaper per capita system.

In July 1967 Presidential advisors Maxwell Taylor and Clark Clifford visited Australia and New Zealand and held consultations with Prime Ministers Holt and Holyoake. As a result the Australian Government decided in September to increase their forces in Vietnam to three-battalion strength, requiring an additional 1700 troops.

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88 MacGibbon, p.43.
89 MacGibbon, p.47.
90 MacGibbon, p.48.
91 Newman, p.31.
93 Barclay, p.161.
under pressure to remain in step with his allies, announced that an additional rifle
company from 1 RNZIR, 'Whisky Company' (W Coy) would be deployed to Vietnam.
This decision caused a severe manpower shortage and reduced 1 RNZIR to little more
than a training depot.94

A memorandum dated October 16th 1967 prepared by Benjamin Read for Walt
Rostow, reveals the determination of the White House to maximise the political capital
resulting from the announcement of the New Zealand and Australian troop increases.
The memorandum suggests:

In order that this news [the troop increases] receive maximum play
it is recommended that the White House press spokesman comment
on this development at tomorrow's daily press conference... If
queried by the press as to whether these increases are a result of the
Clifford/Taylor trip some months ago, it is suggested that the
spokesman say that we understand these increases were made in
answer to requests from the Government of Viet-Nam.95

That the White House was prepared to try to mislead the press into believing that
these increases were the sole result of requests from the Government of South
Vietnam is hardly surprising and indicative of the highly politicised nature surrounding
Allied military support for South Vietnam.

This increase in New Zealand's strength in Vietnam was timely, for unbeknown to the
troops, the greatest offensive of the War was about to be unleashed.

95 Memorandum for Walt W. Rostow from Benjamin H. Read, 16th October 1967,
Library.