

AOTEAROA

Our Whakapapa,
Our Stories



Conflict: Vietnam

The Vietnam War

Timeline of events and NZ involvement

September 1952	NZ provides weapons and ammunition to the French for military use in Vietnam
1954	Vietminh (a national independence coalition who opposed the occupation of Vietnam by the French) besiege the French stronghold of Dien Bien Phu.
7 May 1954	Fall of Dien Bien Phu
20 July 1954	A Geneva Conference agree to a communist North Vietnam and a non-communist South Vietnam along the 17 th Parallel
September 1954	NZ signs the Manila Treaty, an attempt to further build up a united front against communism
1961 -1962	The US heavily commits to supporting the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) including the provision of advisors to the South Vietnam Army
1962	The NZ government sends a civilian medical team to South Vietnam
April 1963	Civilian medical team established at Qui Nhon
November 1963	President Diem of South Vietnam, and his brother are murdered by dissident generals of the South Vietnam Army
August 1964	A supposed 'incident' in the Gulf of Tonkin leads President Johnson to seek Congressional approval for direct US involvement in Vietnam.
1965	US President Johnson visits NZ seeking our military involvement in Vietnam
March 1965	The first US forces come ashore at Da Nang - outright war begins
May 1965	NZ announces a combat unit will be sent to Vietnam
July 16 1965	161 Battery, RNZ Artillery, fire their first round against enemy targets in support of US units. Based in Bien Hoa, north of Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon)
May 1967	NZ expands its military commitment deploying an infantry company (V Company.) From this time, all NZ combat units are based in Nui Dat, in Phuoc Tuy Province.
December 1967	More pressure is applied by the US to NZ. A second rifle company (Whiskey 1 Company) is deployed
1968	NZ military personnel reached 548
1969	NZSAS deployed to Vietnam
January 1971	NZ Army training team deployed to Chi Lang
December 1971	All NZ active service units withdrawn from South Vietnam
March 1972	2 nd NZ Army training team deployed to Don Ba Thin
December 1972	The newly elected Labour Government withdraws all NZ troops from Vietnam
April 1975	War ends when South Vietnam is defeated by the Communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam)

Background

During WW2, in order to beat Hitler, the Allies (of which New Zealand was one) made an alliance with the leader of the USSR (The Soviet Union) Josef Stalin. The Allied victory would have been impossible without Stalin's Red Army.

As WW2 ended, the alliance between the Allies and the USSR broke down.

The Eastern half of Europe was occupied by the Red Army and Communist regimes were established in all these countries. Winston Churchill famously declared that an "Iron Curtain" had fallen on the continent from "Stettin on the Baltic to Trieste on the Adriatic," and his vivid metaphor soon became part of the standard vocabulary of the Cold War.

<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/all-fall-down-end-world-war-ii-europe>

Cold Wars and Proxy Wars

A **Cold War** is a state of political and military tension between two countries or power blocs that stops short of full-scale war. The super-power countries were the United States, China and the USSR. The US upheld the politics of democracy and the USSR and China upheld the politics of Communism. These belief systems are incompatible with each other. However neither side wanted another world war.

Instead the super-powers fought **proxy wars** in other countries of the world. A proxy war is a war fought between groups of smaller countries that each represent the interests of larger powers, and may have help and support from these. The conflict in Vietnam was a proxy war between the US and China, but many other countries were drawn into the conflict because they had alliances with one or the other of these two super-powers. NZ went into the war on the side of the US.

The Domino Theory

The domino theory was a theory prominent in the United States from the 1950s to the 1980s. The theory posited that if one country in a region came under the influence of communism, then the surrounding countries would follow in a domino effect, and all would become communist.

The domino theory was used by successive United States administrations during the Cold War to justify the need for American intervention around the world. This theory was first mooted by US President Eisenhower during an April 7, 1954, news conference, when referring to communism in Indochina. It was used as a justification to go to war against North Vietnam.

<https://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/vietnam-war-timeline>

NZ involvement

New Zealand participated in the Cold War because of our government's decision to support the Western powers in their confrontation with the USSR after WW2.

During the late 1940s New Zealand agreed to support Britain in the Middle East in the event of war with the USSR. The emergence of communist China and the spread of political instability through former European colonies in South-East Asia saw NZ join the anti-communist South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) in 1954. NZ sent troops to counter a communist insurgency in British-ruled Malaya (1949 – 1960), sent troops to Korea (1950 – 1953) when communist North Korea invaded US-backed South Korea, and sent combat forces to South Vietnam (1965 – 1972) during the Vietnam War.

Question

How do you think today's or future battles might be fought? Would we still use guerrilla war tactics?

Additionally, in 1951, NZ and Australia signed the ANZUS military defence treaty with the US. This meant that if one of the three countries were attacked, the other two would come to its defence.

In NZ, Cold War paranoia saw Communist Party members removed from government jobs, while strikers during the 1951 waterfront dispute were labelled communists for disrupting the war effort in Korea.

Many New Zealanders raised questions about New Zealand's foreign policy. They felt that the government's policy of defence via alliances was misguided and increased the likelihood of New Zealand getting dragged into foreign wars.

The NZ government felt it had little choice in supporting the US as we were in alliances with them and the US had been buying a lot of our beef. The US threatened to cancel beef imports from NZ. We could not afford to lose our trade partners and the ANZUS agreement had always included the possibility of 'pay back' time. NZ support of the US in Vietnam was that pay back.

Supporting Link

<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/new-zealand-forces-in-asia>

Arrival in South Vietnam

In April 1964 NZ sent a 25-member non-combatant engineer unit to Thu Dau Mot. They were tasked with building bridges, hospitals, schools, and playgrounds, and to help with other construction projects. The South Vietnamese government hoped that these projects would gain support from the local people for them, and away from the communist influence of the north. With the arrival of 161 Battery, the Engineers were sent to Bien Hoa as there was concern for the engineer's safety. They spent a month doing projects for the Australian Infantry Battalion, before being disbanded and sent home.

The Fighting

The war in Vietnam was a guerrilla war. There were no big WW2 type battles with tank and artillery barrages. There were instead constant infantry patrols – 'search and destroy' operations. The aim was to kill or drive away the enemy so that the civilian population could get on with life. In Phouc Tuy, that aim was achieved.

There were a few notable encounters with the enemy. Not long after the ATF (Australian Task Force) took responsibility for Phouc Tuy and began to build a basecamp, a patrolling company (100+) was attacked by an NVA (North Vietnamese Army) regiment (1000+). The battle took place in a rubber plantation near the village of Long Tan. Outnumbered 10 to one, the Australians went to ground and fought back. The three-man artillery forward observer party (FO) with the company, were Kiwis and the NZ artillery battery was on call to support the company. The attack raged for several hours before the NVA withdrew. The support of the artillery was crucial to this victory and without it the company would have been wiped out.

Supporting Link

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xT6Dzd0_Xfg

In 1968 at the time of the infamous Tet (Vietnamese New Year) offensive, a company of NZ infantry (Victor 2) was in an overnight harbour position in deep jungle north of Phuoc Tuy. At dawn they were attacked by an NVA regiment. Over several hours the company fought off attacks on all sides. Finally, unable to penetrate the company perimeter, and being attacked by artillery, the enemy withdrew. This was the biggest battle that Kiwi infantrymen had fought since WW2. Amazingly no one had been killed and less than a dozen men were wounded.

There were other short sharp battles when enemy bunker systems were encountered or in defence of fire support bases. Usually contact with the enemy was a fleeting exchange of close-range shots whilst patrolling, or the result of a deliberate ambush. Time spent away from the ATF basecamp was being on the frontline, no matter where you were. When soldiers were on patrol no one spoke. There were hand signals only and the aim was to move silently through the jungle, staying off tracks, and be constantly vigilant. There would have been whispered conversations in the evening when camp was set, but it was not unusual to go the entire time (one to four weeks) without speaking out loud.



CSM Dave Hayward giving water to a Viet Cong prisoner at Hoa Long
– February 1968. Photo Supplied.

The My Lai Massacre

Early in the Tet offensive, US troops were held responsible for the My Lai Massacre. Charlie Company was sent to the village of My Lai to hunt out Viet Cong soldiers who they thought may be hiding there. This company had previously suffered several attacks from the Viet Cong in the form of booby traps and land mines. Orders from Colonel Oran Henderson were, "*go in there aggressively, close with the enemy and wipe them out for good.*" Under the command of Lt William L. Calley Jr, they herded more than 300 men, women, and children together and shot them. Other atrocities were also committed. The army tried to cover up the massacre but the story leaked out. A court-martial was held, and several soldiers were tried for murder

but only one officer, Calley Jr, was found guilty. He was sentenced to prison but was immediately released on parole.

The conflict was being covered by reporters and camera crews from around the world. Pictures of alleged atrocities and first-hand witness accounts were beamed into homes around the world. The world-wide attitude of the public was increasingly one of horror at what they were seeing.

Supporting Link

<https://www.thoughtco.com/what-was-the-my-lai-massacre-195156>

The Cost of War : Agent Orange

Agent Orange was the name given to a defoliant used by the US to clear large areas of jungle so the Viet Cong would be more easily seen and attacked. During Operation Ranch Hand, the defoliation squadron would spray jungles and crop fields using slow-moving low-flying fixed wing aircraft and helicopters. Some areas (mangroves) would die off after one spraying whereas jungles would take two or three sprayings to be cleared. More than 73 million litres of herbicides were sprayed during the nine-year campaign, 60% of which was Agent Orange.

Over 400,000 people were killed or maimed by exposure to Agent Orange. Many children suffered from birth defects as a result of this exposure. The herbicide continued to poison the Vietnamese for at least 20 years after the Vietnam War.



Spraying Agent Orange

US Army, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agent_Orange

Napalm

This chemical weapon burned all that it touched. Chemical thickeners were mixed into drums of gasoline by hand to make the napalm. It was then loaded on to aircraft and dropped over suspected Viet Cong bases. When the napalm exploded, flaming blobs stuck to everything it touched causing great harm, pain, and suffering to all

who were hit by it. It also removed all the oxygen from the air causing death through suffocation to its victims.

The Napalm Girl

Phan Thi Kim Phúc and her family were residents of the village of Trảng Bàng in South Vietnam. On June 8, 1972, South Vietnamese planes dropped a napalm bomb on Trảng Bàng, which had been attacked and occupied by North Vietnamese forces. Kim Phúc joined a group of civilians and South Vietnamese soldiers who were fleeing from the Caodai Temple to the safety of South Vietnamese-held positions. The South Vietnamese pilot mistook the group for enemy soldiers and dropped napalm on them. The bombing killed two of Kim Phúc's cousins and two other villagers. Kim Phúc received third degree burns after her clothing was burned by the fire.

Photographer Nick Ut's photograph of Kim Phúc running naked amid other fleeing villagers, South Vietnamese soldiers and press photographers became one of the most haunting images of the Vietnam War. In an interview many years later, she recalled she was yelling, *Nóng quá, nóng quá* ("too hot, too hot") in the picture.

After snapping the photograph, Ut took Kim Phúc and the other injured children to Barsek Hospital in Saigon, where it was determined that her burns were so severe that she probably would not survive. After a 14-month hospital stay and 17 surgical procedures including skin transplantations, she was able to return home. It was only after treatment at a renowned special clinic in Ludwigshafen, West Germany, in 1982, that Kim Phúc was able to properly move again.

Question

Are these tactics allowed to be used today? Research who 'blew the whistle' regarding the use of napalm and Agent Orange.

Supporting Links

<https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/vietnam-war-veterans-kids-agent-orange-impact-nightmare/story?id=59059570>

<https://www.warhistoryonline.com/vietnam-war/history-napalm-vietnam-war.html>
(A Permanent Mark/Veterans Against the Veterans' Administration)

NZ Reaction

New Zealand's involvement in Vietnam was highly controversial and attracted protest and condemnation at home and abroad. While few New Zealanders waved placards in the streets in 1965, by the end of the decade thousands were marching against the war. For a growing number of New Zealanders, their country's participation in the conflict triggered a re-examination of our foreign policy and identity.

The protests criticised the policies of the US government and challenged NZ's alliance-based security. They called for a more independent foreign policy from the US and said that communism did not pose any real threat to NZ.

By 1971 up to 30,000 people were protesting in the streets about NZ's involvement in the war.

Most of the NZ soldiers were full time employees of the military and found the protests difficult to understand. They were doing a job that their government had sent them to do. When they returned and were abused by the public, they were not impressed.

Then CSM Dave Hayward said, *“Did they (the protestors) seriously believe that our government would send its young men to war without a compelling reason? Protestors were ignorant of delicate negotiations and blind to the wider ramifications, the anti-war protestors saw only what they wanted to see.”*

Returning military personnel were abused and protesters threw red paint and crackers at the 161 Battery, and troopers from SAS, as they were arriving at a civic reception in Auckland to welcome them home. Protesters sat in the middle of the road to try and disrupt the parade but were quickly removed by police. Many of the veterans arrived home under the cover of darkness in Whenuapai and were told not to wear their uniforms to avoid attracting attention.

Question

What do you think it would have been like as a family member of a soldier in Vietnam?

Support/recognition of returning military

Over time, the contribution made by NZ forces in Vietnam was recognised as part of our military history. The abuse and attempted humiliation of our returning military is now in the past, but our soldiers are still very much alive and their memories strong. Initially on their return home they were not welcome in the RSA because of the political stigma attached to NZ's involvement in the conflict. These men and women are entitled to the retirement benefits as are all soldiers of today and are now encouraged to join all Anzac ceremonies and services.

Supporting Link

<https://www.stuff.co.nz/taranaki-daily-news/news/91650706/vietnam-veterans-the-grey-ghosts-of-a-forgotten-war>

Supporting Reference:

Rupert Granville Glover, *New Zealand in Vietnam: a study of the use of force in international law*, 1986, Ch 6 'Conclusions' p53

Colin Smith, *The Killing Zone. The New Zealand Infantry in Vietnam*, AQU.

Eyewitness Guides, *Vietnam War*, 2005, DK Publishing Inc

Interview with retired Warrant Officer Class 1 Dave Hayward MDE, MSM. (2020)

Timeline courtesy of retired Colonel R.J.Seymour, MBE, AFNZM. (2020)