

Fact sheet 6: New Zealand and the Vietnam War

- *Why did New Zealand fight in Vietnam?*

When the Second World War broke out in 1939 New Zealand declared in reference to Britain, 'Where she goes, we go; where she stands, we stand'. Until the Second World War Britain was our most significant ally but that conflict changed everything. Britain had been unable to halt Japan's expansion in Asia during the war. New Zealand and Australia felt vulnerable. After the war New Zealand and Australia turned to the United States for added protection.

In 1951 Australia, New Zealand and the US signed the ANZUS treaty. The US was keen to secure allies in its fight against the spread of communism. In 1954 New Zealand joined the US and Australia in signing the South-East Asia Collective Defence Treaty, or Manila Pact, another anti-communist alliance. Other signatories included France, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand and the United Kingdom.

But these treaties did not force New Zealand to become involved in Vietnam. France and Britain, for example, did not participate in the war. The main reason for New Zealand's involvement was the need to be seen to cooperate with our major ally, the US.

- *New Zealand's contribution*

New Zealand's National government was cautious in its approach to Vietnam. Prime Minister Keith Holyoake didn't question the morality of New Zealand involvement but he did doubt whether the war could be won.

Our first response was to send a New Zealand Civilian Surgical Team to Qui Nhon in Binh Dinh province in 1963. It remained there until 1975. Under continuing US pressure, the government provided 25 Army engineers in June 1964. Based at Thu Dau Mot, the capital of Binh Duong province, they were engaged in reconstruction projects, such as road and bridge building.

The crucial decision to send combat forces came in May 1965. The Royal New Zealand Artillery's 161 Battery was to be dispatched to South Vietnam, replacing the Engineers in July 1965. The Battery was initially under command of the US Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade, based at Bien Hoa near Saigon. From June 1966 it served with Royal Australian Artillery field regiments at Nui Dat in Phuoc Tuy Province, east of Saigon. The battery was not withdrawn from Vietnam until May 1971.

In May 1967, V (or Victor) Company, a 182-strong rifle company, was deployed to Vietnam from the 1st Battalion of the Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment, which had been based in Malaysia. Victor Company was joined by W (or Whisky) Company in December. They were placed under the 1st Australian Task Force's command, as part of the Royal Australian Regiment's 2nd Battalion, and later other battalions. These rifle companies were deployed

on infantry operations in Phuoc Tuy province. They were replaced several times, usually after a 12-month tour of duty. The third W Company was withdrawn without replacement in November 1970 and the sixth V Company in December 1971.

The 1st New Zealand Services Medical Team arrived in April 1967 to provide medical and surgical assistance to South Vietnamese civilians. The New Zealanders also relieved a US Army medical team and treated military casualties, including Viet Cong prisoners. The team was withdrawn in December 1971.

Several pilots from the Royal New Zealand Air Force were seconded to the Royal Australian Air Force flying Iroquois helicopters. Another two RNZAF officers served as air controllers with the US Air Force until February 1972. RNZAF transport planes also played a key role in supporting New Zealand's effort, both military and civilian, in Vietnam.

In November 1968 a 26- man troop of the New Zealand Special Air Service (SAS) arrived and were attached to the Australian SAS Squadron at Nui Dat. They carried out long-range reconnaissance and ambushed enemy supply routes. Their arrival brought New Zealand's troop strength to its peak during the war, with almost 550 personnel in Vietnam. The SAS were withdrawn in February 1971, having participated in 155 patrols during their deployment.