

Impressions Of The Vietnam Conflict
By Mr Arthur Haskell

As a person who served in a small way during World War Two, I did not at first feel fully qualified to comment on the war in Vietnam. After a while however I reconsidered the invitation of SWAC (noting the word "encourage") to contribute to the "Reflections on the Vietnam War", eventually deciding to add to the many viewpoints put forward on this most controversial campaign.

Oh, I know, it is so easy to put forward self-righteous views with the benefit of hindsight, but one thing can be said, with a great deal of conviction: It was a war like no other we had ever known. It was a war with no clear objective, other than to show that Democracy could triumph over Communism. It was a war which had many of us dragging out old atlas books to find just where Vietnam was. Soon the whole violent conflict would intrude right into our living rooms via the television set.

We saw a new style of warfare, using hundreds of helicopters as aerial gunboats. We became familiar with such terminology as "Agent Orange" and "Napalm Bombing" which inflicted horrific injuries on adversaries and innocents alike. One particular picture of a young Vietnamese girl, Kim Phuc, running screaming with pain, her naked body burned horribly by napalm was published around the world. It helped swell the growing protest against the war. The morale of our armed forces was not boosted by the growing hostility back home towards the war. Not only did our forces have to contend with the North Vietnamese troops, they were in constant danger from the Viet Cong who had infiltrated the South in large numbers. Distinguishing friend from foe was virtually impossible.

Other than the present confrontations in Iraq and Afghanistan, Australia has been involved in five big wars during the last 106 years, at the cost of 90,000 lives. Forty per cent of the 504 killed in Vietnam were conscripts; a fact which was not accepted too well back home. This was a war in which Australia sent its forces to Vietnam to adhere to its alliance with the United States. Australia and New Zealand were fighting in a war which did not include Great Britain as an ally. Also committed to the Vietnam War as allies of the United States were Thailand, the Republic of Korea and the Philippines. Australia and New Zealand were the only two allies to "pay their own way" operating as an independent combined formation.

In the end, it is the ordinary servicemen in the field who does the fighting- not just with the enemy, but also with his own trepidation. Though part of a unit, each soldier fights his own personal war. For stubborn determination and commitment, the Battle of Long Tan compares well with such legendary names as Gallipoli, the Somme, Passchendaele, Villers-Bretonneux and Kokoda. This 40th Anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan is indeed a time for reflection and true assessment.