

The Vietnam War

THE VIETNAM War was one obvious example of the tensions that existed between communist and capitalist countries during the Cold War. It was unlike any other war Australia had ever been a part of. It was not fought in trenches or on open plains. Nor was the 'enemy' obvious: instead **guerilla** fighters hid in thick jungles and underground caverns. Australia's involvement in the war — from 1962 to 1972 — deeply divided the country, and had long-term impacts on participants and their families.

Background to the war

Vietnam became a divided nation in 1954. Ho Chi Minh, with the support of the Soviets and Chinese, controlled the communist north. Under the rule of Ngo Dinh Diem, the south became a republic supported by the United States. The United States at this time was committed to fighting **communism** and to creating a world dominated by **capitalism**.

Diem, however, was neither a popular nor a strong leader, and he was opposed by communist rebels in the south. With support from the communist north, these southern rebels (later known as the Viet Cong) fought against Diem's government. They operated mainly in rural areas as a guerilla force. The United States sent military advisers, medical teams, troops and weapons to help the south between 1961 and 1965.

Source A A new type of war for Australia

Roving bands of Viet Cong guerillas tormented Australian and US troops with ambush and sudden raids. As well as using the natural features of the topography, they hid in vast underground tunnel complexes. These lay hidden behind enemy lines and provided the ideal launching pad for hit-and-run campaigns and sabotage.

The Australian Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, supported the United States in its military action. His belief in the **domino theory** — that communism was sweeping south towards Australia — convinced many Australians that they were vulnerable to future attack. Battle experiences with the Japanese in World War II had proved that Australia's traditional ally, Britain, could no longer be relied on as its defender. The United States would provide assistance, however, under the terms of the ANZUS (1951) and SEATO (1954) agreements. This meant that Australia had to be prepared to support the United States in return. Australia did so by providing troops for the Korean War (1950–53) and for the war in Vietnam.

Approximately 75 per cent of the southern part of Vietnam is covered with dense forest and 40 per cent of it is mountainous. The climate is tropical and monsoonal with 84 per cent humidity throughout the year. Troops from both sides used the thick vegetation as cover.

Source B The Australian government's focus on defence issues between 1950 and 1965

Situated as we are in the south-west corner of the Pacific . . . our first and constant interest must be the security of our own homeland . . . As the greatest Pacific power is the United States . . . it is absolutely essential that we should maintain the closest and best possible relations with it . . . Should the forces of communism prevail and Vietnam come under the heel of communist China, Malaya is in danger of being outflanked and it, together with Thailand, Burma and Indonesia, will become the next direct object of further communist activities.

Sir Percy Spender, Minister for External Affairs, March 1950, Liberal Party foreign policy

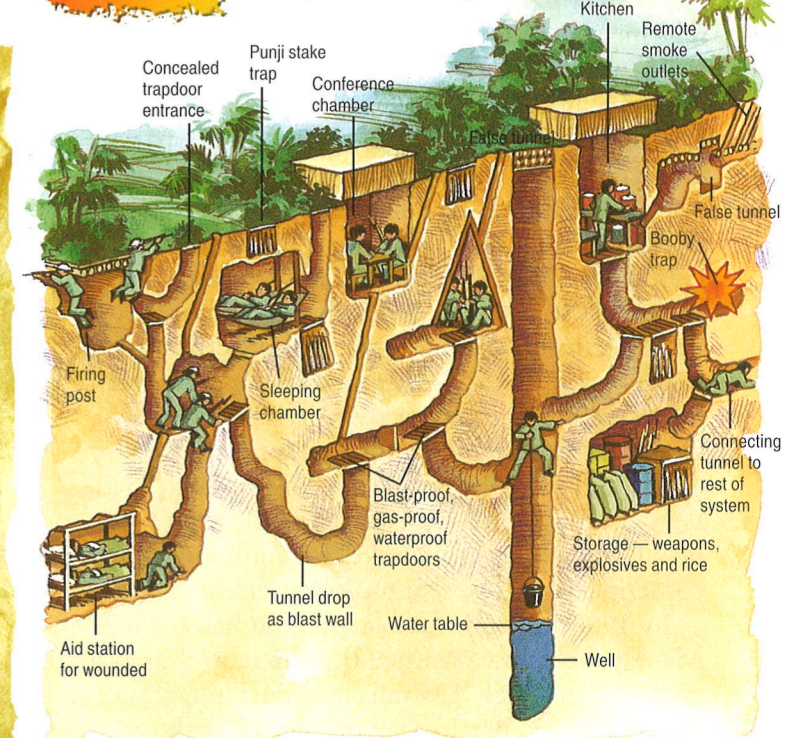
The range of likely military situations we must be prepared to face has increased as a result of recent Indonesian policies and actions, and the growth of communist influence and armed activity in Laos and South Vietnam. If these countries collapsed, there would be a grave threat to Thailand and the whole of south-east Asia would be put at risk.

Prime Minister Robert Menzies, November 1964, on the introduction of conscription

The takeover of South Vietnam would be a direct military threat to Australia and all the countries of south and southeast Asia. It must be seen as part of a thrust by communist China between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Prime Minister Robert Menzies, April 1965, parliamentary speech

Source C Example of Viet Cong tunnel complex



Sometimes local villagers would provide information about Viet Cong movements. However, Australian and US troops always approached with caution; often Viet Cong troops were hiding within, ready to mount an ambush. Villagers were punished by the Viet Cong if they were found to have helped foreign soldiers.

There were many hidden dangers for Australian and US troops within the jungle itself and surrounding terrain. Mines were carefully hidden and booby traps were laid. Sometimes sharpened bamboo spikes were concealed in a pit. When a person stood on the camouflaged lid, it swung down, dropping the man onto the spikes below. It then swung back into position for the next victim.

Agent Orange, a herbicide or weedkiller, was sprayed over jungles and farms to destroy food crops and to defoliate vegetation that provided cover for Viet Cong. Even today many Vietnamese children are born with horrifying birth defects linked to the herbicide.



Napalm bombs were dropped. When these bombs burst, they ignite and splatter burning napalm (a jellied gasoline) over a wide area. It clings to everything it touches and burns violently; death results from burns or suffocation.



The use of chemicals was common. Coloured smoke bombs were used to alert incoming choppers if an area was safe, and to pinpoint bombing targets.