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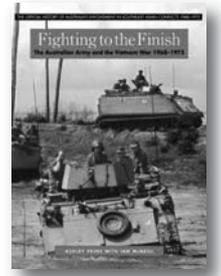
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BOOK REVIEW

Fighting to the finish: the Australian Army and the Vietnam War, 1968–1975

by Ashley Ekins with Ian McNeill

Allen & Unwin: Crows Nest, N.S.W.; 2012; 1184 pp.; ISBN 9781865088242;
RRP \$100.00 (hardback); Ursula Davidson Library call number: 547 EKIN 2011



AD) This book is reported by the publishers to be the product of years of intensive work. In over 1100 pages, the book details the Australian military involvement in the Vietnam War during the peak period from the middle of 1968 to the Australian major withdrawal in late 1971 and finally the withdrawal of the residual force by late 1972. Then the authors provide an excellent final history of the conflict between North and South Vietnam up until 1975, in particular in Phuoc Tuy Province, in which 1st Australian Task Force had been located.

This book is the ninth and final volume of *The Official History of Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948–75* which have been published by Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial. Following author Ian McNeill's death in 1998, Ashley Ekins was appointed by the Australian War Memorial to complete "*Fighting to the Finish*", which follows the other two army histories: *To Long Tan* by Ian McNeill; and *On the Offensive – The Australian Army in Vietnam 1967–68* (2003) by Ian McNeill and Ashley Ekins. Ian McNeill had served with the Australian Army in the Korean and Vietnam Wars and subsequently became a member of the Official History Unit at the Australian War Memorial. Ashley Ekins is the senior historian at the War Memorial.

During the peak period from 1968 to 1971, the Australian Army maintained a force of over 6000 troops in Vietnam and they carried out almost 100 major operations. The pace of operations was unrelenting and 250 soldiers were killed in action or died of wounds or other causes during this period.

There is a very comprehensive account of operations, including a fresh interpretation of the fierce encounter of the North Vietnamese Army with Australian infantry and armour in the Binh Ba village and rubber plantation just to the north-west of the 1st Australian Task Force base. There is a view expressed of the clearing of the controversial barrier minefield which stretched north-east from the 1st Australian Task Force base to the coast. The political and strategic reasons for the withdrawal of 1st Australian Task Force and 1st Australian Logistic Support Group in late 1971 is well portrayed as is the final withdrawal of the remnants of Australian Army Training Team Vietnam in late 1972. The description of the battles between the North and South Vietnamese which concluded in 1975 is very vivid.

Most casual readers will have difficulty in retaining an immediate understanding of the structure of the text

of the book, but will be able to reflect on the theme of many incidents. The reader is given a very clear portrayal of the continual patrolling and cordon-and-search by the junior commanders and their soldiers, together with the tenacity of the enemy. Within the volume of words, there is an inference, but not a critical analysis, of the apparent lack of coherence between successive commanders at many, if not most, levels. It is disappointing that there is no real coverage of the Agent Orange controversy. In the main, the authors have left the view of dissenters, that Australia should not have been involved in the Vietnam War, to other historians.

Researchers will benefit from the very comprehensive table of contents, twenty three maps, a table of abbreviations, a detailed chronology, and 428 pages of appendices – including a very helpful summary of the operations by Colonel David Chinn MBE, endnotes and a very detailed index. However, only very limited details are provided of the non-combat operations by construction engineers, logistic units, psycho operators, surveyors, civil and military liaison units *etc.* There is a very brief, but critical, summary of the civil affairs operations up until 1970. A prime aim of the Australian government to provide civil aid to the local Vietnamese is expressed. However, continual civil construction and civil support by Army units after 1970 has not been portrayed. This physical aid included housing "villages" for the Army of the Republic of Viet Nam, roads, bridges and the final Australian aid project, namely construction of the jungle training centre and housing complex. Some details of the important role of logistic units throughout the campaign would have been appropriate. Probably there is adequate coverage of the employment of the Australian Army Training Team, in particular if a reader is aware of the book *The Team – The Australian Army Advisors in Vietnam* by Ian McNeill.

Overall, I am of the view that this book covering the last seven years of the war in Vietnam is a valuable reference for researchers. Its coverage of Australia's involvement from mid-1968 until late 1972 – after the "Third" Tet Offensive – in particular is thorough. The text highlights the experience of Australians at virtually every level from senior commanders and planners to the fighting troops, as well as providing an insight into the political involvement of the Australian government. In summary, *Fighting to the Finish* is comprehensive, revealing and confronting.

John M. Hutcheson