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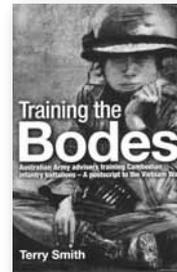
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## **BOOK REVIEW**

# ***Training the Bodes: Australian Army advisers training Cambodian infantry battalions – a postscript to the Vietnam War***

by Terry Smith<sup>1</sup>

*Big Sky Publishing Pty Ltd: Newport, NSW; 2011; 215 pp.; ISBN 978 1 92194 101 6; RRP \$34.99 (hardback); Ursula Davidson Library call number: 547 SMIT 2011*



This book fills a gap in our knowledge of Australian involvement in the Vietnam War. Although there are references to the training of Cambodians by the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV) in other volumes, such as *The men who persevered* by B. Davies and G. McKay and the recently published *Fighting to the Finish* by A. Ekins and I. McNeill, this book tells the story providing details that are often not available to those who were not intimately involved in the events narrated.

It is a history written by an observant soldier. The book was based on the text of letters that the author wrote to his wife while the events were occurring. The details have not been embellished nor polished smooth for publication.

The book is the story of how Australian, New Zealand and American advisers had to equip and train Cambodian soldiers to fight as light infantry battalions in a 12-week period, using an American training programme. The selection of the soldiers and their leaders was out of the control of the trainers. Most of the soldiers came from peasant backgrounds. Some were over age and some were under age, even by Cambodian standards. The trainers did not have the option of 'back-squadding' slow learners. There were obvious faults in the Cambodian ration scale as the book tells the stories of hungry Cambodian soldiers chasing fish in drainage ditches and cutting bamboo shoots for food whilst on patrol.

The author emphasises that the performance of a sub-unit or unit in combat directly reflected the leadership of the sub-unit's or unit's leader. He illustrates this point with several examples and reproduces an after action report in Appendix Six which gives a graphic account of a disaster that occurred due to poor leadership during an ambush conducted by a Vietnamese platoon. The Australians had to train the Cambodian units with the leaders that had been appointed in Cambodia. This was a weakness of the scheme.

The trainers had to use local interpreters. The lesson from this is that if Australians are going to train soldiers who do not have English as a first language, then the Australian Defence Force should provide Australian service interpreters who are familiar with military equipment and technology.

Each battalion's training cycle culminated in two field training exercises in Viet Cong territory. There was a fairly

high chance of contact with the Viet Cong and the exercises were conducted with live ammunition. Most battalions suffered casualties from enemy actions during these field exercises. That Canberra considers the Australian advisers were not in combat is incomprehensible. It simply reflects a political wish. The civilianisation of the transportation to convey the Cambodians to the field exercises is interesting as the roads were not secure. It worked better, however, than the British civilianisation of the minesweeper crews who were used in the Dardanelles campaign in 1915.

Over everything hung the spectre of what was likely to happen to the battalions being trained when they returned to Cambodia and met the highly motivated, well-trained Khmer Rouge and North Vietnamese forces. The prospects were not good.

The author reports the humiliation of some of the members of the AATTV when plucked from a Vietnamese Officer Course field exercise to be withdrawn from Vietnam. The indecent haste of the withdrawal was to match the rhetoric in Canberra.

The title of the book lets the author down as *Training the Bodes* does not catch the eye of the casual browser of titles in a book shop or library. 'Bodes' is not an abbreviation that is well known in Australia, although The Rising Sun Badge on the dust jacket will attract the eye of the casual browser interested in Australian military history. The subtitle, *Australian Army advisers training Cambodian infantry battalions – a postscript to the Vietnam War*, explains what the book is about, however labelling it as a 'postscript' is misleading as it is about the closing phase of the Australian commitment to the Vietnam War only, not the war overall. The war continued on well after the final Australian involvement.

The author carefully avoids overuse of abbreviations and acronyms. The text is complemented by maps, photographs and the author's sketches. Some of the photographs in this book are also in *Fighting to the Finish*; however the caption for the photograph on page 47 of *Training the Bodes* may be more accurate than that for the same photograph on page 641 of the Official History.

The book is very well referenced and the seven appendices contain many additional details that complement the story and provide further information.

This book may be used in the future as a benchmark to compare what was done in Vietnam to what is being done now in Afghanistan. I recommend the book to anyone who is interested in the Vietnam War and/or military training.

**John Hitchen**

<sup>1</sup>Lieutenant Colonel T. J. Smith, AM, MBE, RFD, ED (Ret'd), a citizen soldier for 30 years, is a member of the Institute. He served with the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam from July to November 1972 training Cambodian light infantry battalions and was awarded the Cambodian National Defence Medal of the Division with Silver Star.