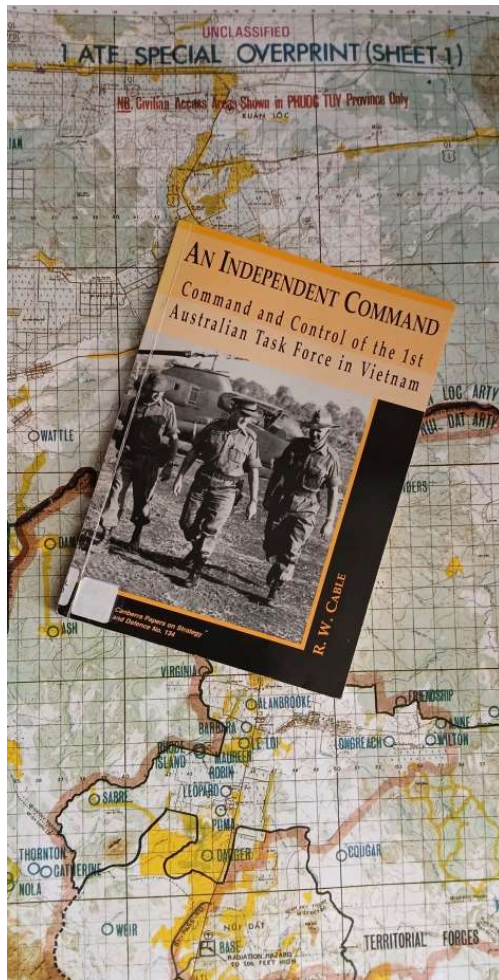


RUSI-NSW Book Review

The Ursula Davidson Library is producing a list of ninety-treasures from its book collection during 2024, to coincide with the 90th-Anniversary of the Anzac Memorial. This is the third book in the series to be reviewed by Paul Simadas, an RUSI-NSW member.



Above: The book is pictured over a 1971 tactical map of the principal operational area in which the 1st Australian Task Force fought between 1966 and 1971. Credit: AWM original copied by reviewer

“An Independent Command: Command and Control of the 1st Australian Task Force In Vietnam” Captain R. W. Cable, soft-cover, published by the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre of the Australian National University, Canberra. 2000. No. 34 in the series ‘Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence’.

At the time of writing this monograph, Ross William Cable was a 25-year-old Australian army Captain who had recently completed his Honours year at the Australian Defence Force Academy. This relatively brief account of higher-command practice during the ‘task force’ war in Vietnam 1968-1971 is based on Cable’s longer and unpublished Honours thesis. This is not a weakness as the author has applied his writing and research skills to distil the essential elements of command in the 1st Australian Task Force and include in it a wider study of the evolution of Australian operational and tactical practices in the Vietnam War. This is an informative and fast-moving account.

The commander of the 1st Australian Task Force in Vietnam 1966-1972 held the key operational command in Australia’s largest military commitment of the Cold War period. Although the Vietnam War has been written on at length, the ‘Brigade’- level command, held in Vietnam by the commander of 1 ATF, has received comparatively less attention.

This monograph examines the problems and conditions faced by the seven Task Force commanders; their styles of command and the degree of independence they were allowed by Australian and US higher commanders; how much operational command they exercised and the types of operations carried out under each. It concludes that although the commanders were allowed a large degree of independence, apparent variations in Task Force methods were due less to the influence of personality than to differences in the types of operations required to counter a changing enemy situation.

The task force was not specifically responsible for the security of Phuoc Tuy province and its population. This was always in the hands of the South Vietnamese and American military and civilian authorities, which left the Australians to fight the enemy. Later on in the war this changed as the Australians took an increased role in pacification efforts and the ‘Vietnamisation’- handover.

There is much of interest to read in this monograph. Certainly, later studies of the Australian war, particularly the official history volumes, have incorporated more detail and new archival sources, but the author had two important resources available at the time for his monograph. Firstly he relies on Australian war diaries, combat after-action reports, intelligence summaries, and American military and other reports to analyse the performance of the Australian task force commanders. Secondly, in 1999, Cable was able to interview most of the former Australian commanders of HQ Australian Forces Vietnam, HQ 1st Australian Task Force and three of the commanding officers who led infantry battalions in Vietnam. He also interviewed the Australian task force's former immediate superior American commanders, the three generals who commanded II Field Force.

This study considers the conduct of the war in four chapters: the establishment of the task force presence in Vietnam in 1966, the subsequent operations to secure Phuoc Tuy Province in 1966-1967, the Tet Offensive in 1968 and the out-of-province and province combat operations fought by the task force in that year, and in the final chapter 'Consolidating Success' analyses the period to the task force withdrawal in December 1971 and the end of major Australian combat operations.

The monograph makes several important observations in relation to the war which can be summarised as follows.

1. Task force commanders operated at both the tactical and operational level of war, largely because of their fixed geographic area of operations, their national obligations and the close relationship they enjoyed with the senior American and Australian headquarters above them. Significant independence, perhaps better expressed as 'freedom-of-action', was granted to the seven brigadiers who served as task force commanders. Conversely, they exercised tactical-level command over the force under their control, sometimes even

directing independent battalion-level or sub-unit operations.

The task force commander remained dependent on American guidance and combat support. The Australian commander was given significant freedom-of-action in his decision making by the Americans. The Australian government also rarely intervened, except to set the force size and to order the withdrawal of the task force in 1971.



Above: The Commander of the 1st Australian Task Force in Vietnam, Brigadier S.C. Graham (right), talks with General William Westmoreland, commander Military Assistance Command Vietnam in 1967. Good relations with the Americans at all levels, especially the highest, was essential to Australian success in operations and to the provision of combat support from the United States' forces in theatre.

2. The author argues the task force fought a campaign against the enemy along several and overlapping lines-of-effort over the six-years 1966-1971. The task force did not fight a disjointed series of tactical operations, but a flexible military campaign at the operational-level, adapted to the changing battlefield conditions.

3. The conundrum for the task force commander remained the scarce forces available to him to conduct the campaign, the 'troops-to-task' dilemma. Balancing the requirements for base defence at Nui Dat, with security operations in the province and combat against the North Vietnam and Viet Cong forces was a constant challenge. Attempts like the barrier mine-field constructed in the south of Phuoc Tuy province in 1967 was a 'serious mistake', if

made for understandable reasons at the time to release troops for offensive operations elsewhere.

4. Each of the task force commanders served varying time in Vietnam. Some did less than a year in-country, a shorter period than their subordinate commanding officers' tenure of one-year.

5. The task force headquarters was never really large enough control the myriad tasks confronting the commander. The commanders' headquarters was relatively small compared to ones in World War Two, his units often stretched to the limit. In 1968 a deputy task force commander was appointed. By 1970, the commander had a somewhat larger and seasoned headquarters staff and sufficient Infantry and armour forces to conduct broader operations against the enemy.

6. The author considers that the series of out-of-province operations between 1968 and 1971 were not a new or changed focus for the task force. In fact, it was an extension of existing practices employed in the province. The enemy did not recognise South Vietnamese provincial boundaries and often freely moved in and out of Phuc Tuy province. Ultimately, both types of operations had at their heart achieving the same objective, security in the province by engaging and defeating the enemy as widely as possible.

7. The task force commander was reliant on his key staff and subordinates to exercise command, especially as task force operations became increasingly complex and demanding. The author notes that each battalion commander in Vietnam had previously served in Korea, one even in New Guinea in World War Two. Each of the seven task force commanders had served both in Korea and World War Two.

8. As the political direction of the war changed and enemy activities declined as a result of the success of Australian operations, the task force became increasingly involved in civic-action and security operations. In addition, the force

began the training of South Vietnamese forces in the province, and commenced the drawdown of its own forces.



Above: 'Hand-over, take-over'. The outgoing 1st Australian Task Force Deputy Commander, Colonel Donald Dunstan (left) welcomes his replacement, Colonel K. S. McKenzie in 1969.

9. Good relations with the Americans, the South Vietnamese forces and the provincial chief were central to the successful conduct of Australian operations. The security of the 117,000 inhabitants in the province became an important objective in its own right. It should be noted that at its peak 8,000 Australians and New Zealanders were in the province (along with a large number of Allied military forces) to protect that population, a ratio of 1:10.

There is only one reference in the monograph to the New Zealand forces that served with the task force, a regrettable omission.

The book has detailed primary source footnotes and an excellent bibliography of the books, interview sources, and the Service and academic journals used by the author to write this monograph. Unfortunately, there is no index, a serious weakness for researchers using the text. However, in a single day, or two, a reader can acquaint him or herself with the key aspects of Australian task force operations in Vietnam, and the command challenges faced by the commanders in fighting a complex and large-scale coalition war. This is a readable and thoughtful study on the subject, as relevant today as it was in 2000.