

Honouring Australian Vietnam Veterans

The Australian Army Training Team Vietnam & the Australian Navy Clearance Diving Team 3

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Australia's ten year involvement in the Vietnam War generated some of the greatest controversy in military history however in spite of this, the Australian troops in Vietnam showed bravery, endurance and were proof that the service men and women of Australia had not lost the spirit of their forefathers. In Vietnam, some of the most important but likewise most difficult tasks were taken on by some of the smallest units. The Australian Army Training Team Vietnam "*displayed unexcelled initiative, relentless perseverance, and undaunted courage.*"¹

In the same way, the Australian Navy Clearance Diving Team Three, "*On every occasion, displayed the highest degree of professional competence.*"² Both deserve to be honoured and remembered, with a special place in Australia's military history, for their contribution to both Vietnam and to the Australian Spirit.

Unique, highly trained, specially selected and often working alone, in pairs, or in some cases, in small groups no greater than ten, the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam faced one of the most important, most challenging jobs of the Vietnam War. Known colloquially as "The Team" and not existing outside the Vietnam conflict, the group was "*...the first Australian Army unit to serve in Vietnam (1962) and the last to leave (1972)*".³

Considering their small size, they were the most highly decorated unit in Vietnam earning 114 British and Australian decorations, four of which were Victoria Crosses, along with a US Meritorious Unit Commendation and a Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Palm Unit Citation. "The Team" was first under the command of then Brigadier F.P. Serong and was created entirely from volunteers. Apart from ceremonial occasions like ANZAC Day, "The Team" were rarely seen all together as a whole unit. It was the duty of "The Team" to train South Vietnamese military groups and they were dispersed all around the country. As if following the words of Laurence of Arabia exactly, "*It is their war, and you are to help them, not win it for them.*"⁴ Some worked with government troops and others American training teams, village militias and indigenous peoples of the mountainous areas. The men of "The Team" taught map reading and jungle navigation, how to counter an ambush, stealth, patrolling and tracking. Most importantly, they taught patience. Work was often challenging due to a language barrier, limited resources, differences between American and Australian methods and, in some cases, low unit morale.

Early in the Vietnam War, members of "The Team" were not allowed to fight alongside those whom they had trained. This policy was soon changed, due to its impracticality, and "*AATTV members often found themselves engaged in combat more fierce than that experienced by most*

¹ United States Meritorious Unit Commendation Citation (Australia Army Training Team)

² US Navy Commendation Citation (Australian Navy Clearance Divers)

³ Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia

⁴ Lawrence of Arabia, the Arab Bulletin, 20th August, 1917

other Australian units in South Vietnam.”⁵ “The Team” became leaders, an example of military skill, an inspiration to their troops and a valued assistance, defending bases from attack or on patrol. Lieutenant General Sir Thomas Daly, the Army Chief for the majority of the Vietnam War stated about “The Team”, “...all those who know them cannot but be inspired by the tremendous job they are doing both for Vietnam and Australia.”⁶ In such harsh and isolating conditions, the men of the Australian Army Training Team are an amazing example of Australian persistence and courage that deserves to be remembered and respected.

Another unit working selflessly with such spirit, conducting one of the most dangerous jobs of the Vietnam War was the Australian Navy Clearance Diving Team Three, “...one of the smallest, and unrivalled, Australian units...”⁷ Based at Vung Tau and Da Nang, the CDT3 was on call 24/7 and assisted with many major American operations. Participating in operations in Military Region 1 and the Vietnamese Delta Region, CDT3 often worked outside their core responsibilities, testing their ingenuity and adaptability.

Their main tasks included; protection of ships against enemy swimmer attack, blocking the coast to prevent resupply of enemy troops in the South, and preventing the use of major river systems for mine attacks. These operations were known as ‘Stable Door’, ‘Market Time’ and ‘Game Warden’ respectively. CDT3 were also tasked with explosive disposal, destroying Vietcong cave systems, clearing barriers for allies, creating access to suspected enemy positions, and salvaging classified materials from downed aircraft. “To seek to find danger in order to protect others...[calls] for a very unique character of human resolve,”⁸ and the CDT3 proved their bravery, working with unstable materials in harsh conditions, murky water and fast currents every day and often coming under fire.

Initially, it was not permitted for the Clearance Divers to join in US Navy SEAL operations, but once this ban was lifted they worked often with South Vietnamese, as well as American Special Forces. During the war, the Vietcong put a price on the CDT3’s heads of \$60,000 dead or alive. Nevertheless, by the end of the war, the CDT3 had participated in 68 Special Operations, searched 7,573 ships and conducted 153 other important diving tasks. Deployed in seven month rotations in teams of six, 49 members of CDT3 served in Vietnam with only two casualties. “Without a doubt this small band of Australians was known and respected for professional ability... [and] there probably was no more effective unit deployed during the war in Vietnam, on either side.”⁹

To honour the bravery needed by the Divers, the CDT3 earned, 25 decorations, including a United States Navy Meritorious Unit Citation, a US Presidential Unit Citation and two US Navy Unit Commendations, a great honour. Lieutenant Commander Russ Crawford, in charge of the Royal Australian Navy Diving School, recognises the importance of the ability to; “reflect on the sacrifices...[and] the significant contribution Clearance Diving Team 3 made in the Vietnam War.”¹⁰ Despite their work not having the prestige of Australian aircraft and ships, CDT3’s job was vital. Vietnam’s extensive coastline and river system made it easy for the enemy to attack ships with mines, but the CDT3 conducted themselves with bravery, endurance and teamwork. Australian Clearance Diving Team 3’s work should be remembered

⁵ Australian Government, Department of Veterans Affairs

⁶ McNeill, *The Team*, pg.484

⁷ navy.gov.au

⁸ Sir James Killen, *In the Ocean’s Dark Embrace*, Tony Ey

⁹ McAulay, *Ocean’s Dark Embrace*, pg.69

¹⁰ news.navy.gov.au

as above the call of duty, fundamental to the protection of shipping and many operations during the Vietnam War.

The Vietnam War was tough, both in the harsh conditions experienced by Australian troops, but also in lack of community support. Conscription was controversial and the media broadcasted the war onto people's home television screens like never before. Nevertheless, the Australian troops in Vietnam were involved in many successful military operations. From a humanitarian point of view they won the hearts and the minds of the South Vietnamese people, conducting building and medical projects to assist the advancement of their communities. Furthermore, despite the less than ideal environmental and social conditions, the service people of the Australian Military serving in Vietnam conducted themselves with honour. Their example of mateship and courage can be followed today. In particular, the small units of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam and the Australian Navy Clearance Diving Team Three deserve to have their service honoured, respected and remembered.

“The Team” were the longest serving Australian unit in Vietnam. Their skills in leadership, endurance and bravery- even when working alone- to train South Vietnamese units, provide an inspiration to Australians today. They show the value of persistence and teamwork with allies no matter where they come from, despite difficulty or fear. The same applies to the CDT3 who worked in such harsh conditions, handling lethal weaponry in order to protect valuable shipping. These men possessed unique and valuable skills, earning them participation in Special Forces Operations. They are an example of Australian bravery, courage and working for others in the greater good.

Said about CDT3, but relevant to the brave men of “The Team” also, *“In all their activities, constant courage was to be found. And here too was to be found that great stimulant in human affairs-humour. This indeed was mateship at its very best.”*¹¹ Despite controversy and harsh conditions, the Australian Forces in Vietnam were able to maintain the ANZAC spirit. The Australian Army Training Team and the Australian Navy Clearance Diving Team Three in particular deserve to be remembered, respected and honoured with an important place in Australia's wartime history for their upholding of the ANZAC spirit's vital ideals.

Today, Australia's ten years of service in Vietnam are remembered with pride. Around 60,000 personnel are respected for their commitment to their country, their duty and their mates. Tien Ngyuen, a Veteran from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, has said about the Australian Forces in Vietnam: *“we experienced firsthand the valiant fighting spirit of the Aussie soldiers during the Vietnam War...”*¹² *“United and Undaunted”* and *“Persevere”* the mottos of the Australian Navy Clearance Diving Team Three and the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam respectively, are proof of why these two units deserve to be honoured and remembered. Their values and their sacrifices display all that is important to the Australian character. As a valuable part of our wartime history, they likewise give guidance and wisdom, with a focus on teamwork, courage and endurance, for our future.

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¹² *New Perceptions of the Vietnam War, Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen*

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