

History of the 1st Australian Civil Affairs Unit in South Vietnam 1967-1971

By Barry L Smith

Introduction

This item is a short history of the 1st Australian Civil Affairs Unit (CA) in South Vietnam (SVN). CA was not the first Australian Army Unit to conduct civic action projects in SVN, nor even the first to do so in Phuoc Tuy Province, nor was it the only Australian services unit to perform civic action projects after the unit arrived in SVN in June 1967.

The wider context is touched on here only briefly, but it is important to understand that during the 1960s and early 1970s, civic action projects were undertaken on an ever increasing scale by Australian, US and other countries' armed forces throughout SVN. This civic action had little to do with altruism, and almost everything to do with the political motive of winning the support of the South Vietnamese people for their Government in then Saigon. Civic action, wherever and by whom ever performed, was part of a nation-wide program with long-term political and therefore military objectives. A subsidiary aim from the Australian point of view was to obtain goodwill towards Australian forces in SVN and Australia generally.

Background Prior to June 1967

When the 1st Australian Task Force (1ATF) first arrived in Phuoc Tuy Province in mid-1966, the military security situation was poor. The province had not been under government control for several years before the task force arrived. Things had improved little by the time CA arrived. Single vehicles could not travel most roads. Some roads required fully escorted convoys before they could be traversed.

The Province's population was about 125,000. The large majority of the population lived in and around Baria, Hoa Long, Long Dien and Dat Do. The predominant religions were Buddhism and Catholicism.

Beginnings of Civic Action by the Australian Army

In 1965, members of the 1st Battalion Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR) were conducting civic action projects Bien Hoa Province.

In early 1966, a nucleus group of ex Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV) members had formed under Captain Bob Rooney and began carrying out civic action-type projects to assist the local population. Rooney's group was not a formal unit. The energetic and flamboyant Major John Donohoe took over the group in mid 1966.

At the time, and continuing after CA arrived in Phuoc Tuy in June 1967, there was also a US Army Unit operating in the province conducting civic action projects – the 14th AA Platoon, 2nd Civil Affairs Company, US Army which became attached to CA after CA arrived in Nui Dat.

1st Australian Civil Affairs Unit

The 1st Australian Civil Affairs Unit was raised at Middle Head, Sydney in April 1967. In June 1967, it moved to South Vietnam, to Nui Dat in Phuoc Tuy Province under the command of Lt Col John McMonagh, Royal Australian Engineers.

CA remained in Vietnam, until November 1971. Some positions in the unit were Corps specific. Others were non-corps posting. At the peak it was never more than 60 officers and other ranks at any one time. It had five Commanding Officers as follows:

- a. Lt Col John McDonough, RAE
- b. Lt Col Kevin Latchford, RAAC
- c. Lt Col Peter Gration, RAE
- d. Lt Col Paddy Outridge, RA Inf
- e. Lt Col Laurie Wright, RAE

During its time in SVN, CA was located at Nui Dat, but for all this period, it was a unit of Headquarters Australian Force Vietnam (HQ AFV) in Saigon; it was not a 1 ATF unit. CA's CO had direct access to the Commander AFV. On day-to-day operational matters, CO CA worked closely with Commander 1ATF.

Funded through the then Department of External Affairs, and in part by the South East Asian Treaty Organization, the activities, size and shape of CA was constantly changing between 1967 and 1971. The unit consisted of a headquarters/administration group plus operational detachments with specific responsibilities. A section of the Unit was also established at Vung Tau:

- a. The **Engineer Detachment** typically constructed windmills (of which 14 were constructed in all), schoolrooms, market buildings, fences, and medical dispensaries. Two major projects, one each at the beginning and end of CA's presence in SVN were designing and creating a completely new village called Soui Nghe beside Route 2 north of the Task Force Base, and Project 399 which was the construction of 600 houses for the ARVN soldiers around the Province.
- b. The **Medical Detachment** was heavily involved in operations known as MEDCAPS (Medical Civil Aid Programs), conducted daily in province villages. By 1969, MEDCAPS were incorporated into what were called ICAPS (Integrated Civil Aid Programs), conducted several nights per week, when a medical team would stay overnight in a village and treat anyone who turned up for treatment. A movie screen would be erected nearby and those in the queue for treatment, and other villages, would

watch the films. Not surprisingly, the films were chosen because of their themes, which promoted South Vietnam at the expense of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces. There were also DENTCAPS (Dental Civil Aid Programs) carried out by 1ATF units other than CA. The CA Medical Detachment co-ordinated all MEDCAPS and DENTCAPS conducted by 1ATF units. The Detachment's head was also the province CORDS (Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development) adviser on medical matters.

- c. Typical tasks for the **Education Detachment** were advising on where new schools could be built (by the Engineer Detachment), providing educational supplies to Province schools, and conducting English language classes (which were very popular – Australian soldiers would spend time alone in villages at schools giving these classes). During 1969/70 when CA was under the command of Lt Col Peter Gratton, the Education Detachment also became responsible for youth and sport activities in Phuoc Tuy. At this time, the Detachment OIC was also the Province CORDS adviser on Education, and the Detachment's 2IC was the Province CORDS adviser on youth and sports matters, co-ordinating sporting activities in Phuoc Tuy.
- d. The **Liaison Detachment** consisted of Vietnamese-speaking Australian officers who were graduates of the RAAF School of Languages in Victoria. Described by Lt Col Gratton in 1969 as “the eyes and ears” of CA. The Liaison Officers' (LOs) responsibility was to be out in villages every day talking and listening to the civilian population, assessing where projects might be warranted, preparing feasibility studies, and generally developing close contacts at village level. Working with only their drivers, LOs were widely known and accepted by local Vietnamese. LOs spent almost their entire time, including at one point up three nights a week, in local villages. Apart from watching for opportunities for civic action projects, LOs would also typically deliver mail from VC prisoners of war incarcerated around the country to the prisoners' families in Phuoc Tuy, and collect mail and gifts from the families for the prisoners and put these items into “the system” which eventually delivered them to the prisoners. LOs gave Vietnamese language presentations to former VC and NVA who defected to the south under the Chieu Hoi (Open Arms) Program (defectors were known as “Hoi Chanh”), and delivered solatium payments to local Vietnamese families when these compensation payments were decided upon. On occasions, when visitors to the Task Force required an Australian interpreter, LOs were often tasked. For example, politicians and journalists visiting from Australia often preferred Australian interpreters to both guide them around the province and do their interpreting at the same time.
- e. The **Agricultural Detachment** advised on, and delivered supplies for, projects such as rice, sorghum and other crop growing. This Detachment also had responsibility for animal husbandry projects when these developed from about 1969 onwards. Atypical project would be

to supply the wherewithal including animals for local civilians to start their own chicken or pig farms.

- f. The **Vung Tau Section** was established with one officer with no technical or support staff other than a driver and interpreter. Its modus operandum was entirely by contract labour.

Principles of Military Civic Action

The principles of military civic action were based on the following principles, calculated to achieve maximum impact on the civilian population, bearing in mind that the primary aim of civic action was to win the support of the local population for the Saigon regime:

- a. The local population had to “own” the project. If they felt a sense of ownership, and the project was subsequently damaged or destroyed by the VC, then the outcome would be antagonism toward the VC. Ownership involved features like encouraging the local population to suggest or otherwise originate projects, and to actively contribute their labour during the construction phase.
- b. Projects had to be completed as quickly as possible, for maximum impact.
- c. Projects were initiated in the name of the appropriate ministry, eg Education, Health.
- d. Desirably, projects lent to be themselves to publicity.
- e. Project results had to be observable, measurable and tangible, and ideally impact beneficially on as many people as possible.
- f. Wherever possible, credit was always given to the South Vietnam Government.

Operational Items

CA unit members were vulnerable to enemy action should the VC have wanted to do so. Many CA members spent time alone in villages, for example, delivering English language lessons in Dat Do. CA vehicles travelled routes often by themselves with just a driver and one passenger.

Overall there was little hostile action against members of the unit. In the early days after the unit's arrival in Nui Dat, there were sniper incidents in Hoa Long, and a medical team became involved in a contact in Hoi My, south of

Opening of an Australian windmill installed by 1ACAU during the war



Dat Do, with CA members suffering minor rifle or gunshot wounds. There were other minor incidents later, for example, when the VC destroyed the water reticulation system on Long Son Island, just days after the system came into operation.

Towards the end of the 1960s and in the early 1970s, the emphasis on pacification increased throughout South Vietnam, including the volume of civic action projects being carried out by the Australian forces. By this time, the Commanding Officer of CA was responsible for co-ordination of all military civic action by Australian forces, including Vung Tau and Phan Rang (where the RAAF had units) and Saigon. In practice the various CO's overall spent little time outside Nui Dat except for regular visits to Saigon to brief HQ AFV. The major focus of civic action efforts by Australian troops was in Phuoc Tuy. Towards the end of the Task Force's time at Nui Dat, every individual unit in the Task Force was at one stage directed to put resources onto civic action projects, and they did. 5RAR, for example, built a two-room school in Ong Trinh Hamlet, alongside Route 15 between Baria and Bien Hoa.

Barry L Smith

1ACAU Historian

smithbl_2614@yahoo.com

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