Vietnam has experienced centuries of foreign interference and occupation, internal conflict and civil war. Its history is complex, intertwined with those of neighbouring countries – Laos, Cambodia, China and Mongolia. At this point in its history, the words of General Kiet ring true; the people of Vietnam have prevailed, the north and south are united and are no longer under external rule.

Vietnam's independence is a direct result of the Indochina Wars of 1946-1975. The period can be divided into three:

- the 1st Indo-China War or 'The French War' (1946-1954);
- the 2nd Vietnam War or 'The American War' (1960-1973); and
- the 3rd Vietnam War (1975).

The Chinese occupied Vietnam for a thousand years until ejected in 938 AD. Then followed three unsuccessful invasions in the 13th century by the Mongol, Kublai Khan. In 1857, the French arrived in retaliation for the persecution of its Catholic missionaries and, by 1883, had conquered Cochinchina (much of Vietnam, Cambodia and later, Laos). Throughout that harsh French regime of nearly one hundred years, Vietnamese resistance simmered as nationalism intensified in the pursuit of change, eventually by violent revolution. Headed by Moscow-trained revolutionary, Ho Chi Minh, Vietnamese Communism was born in 1925, but the French brutally suppressed any Viet armed resistance during the 1920s and 1930s.

In World War II, the Japanese occupied Vietnam from 1940 to the war's end in 1945 but, upon the allied victory, a political hiatus was created. The Viet Minh (the military arm of the Vietnam Independence League) occupied Hanoi and, a few days later in September 1945, Ho Chi Minh declared an independent Vietnam. However, after British and Chinese troops arrived to take the Japanese surrender, France swiftly re-established its strict control. Armed resistance to this by the Viet Minh, commanded by Vo Nguyen Giap, saw the beginning of the 1st Indo-China War in November 1946.

The 1st Indo-China War, "The French War" (1946 – 1954)

The Viet Minh fought the French using mainly guerrilla tactics, initially avoiding any major conventional warfare confrontation. Then in 1953, the Viet Minh intensified its offensive against the French who retaliated by setting a trap in a valley town called Dien Bien Phu near the Laotian border, blocking a trade route and hoping to lure the Viet Minh into a major showdown. About 13,000 troops of the French Expeditionary Force (including the French Foreign Legion plus Moroccan and Algerian regiments) developed a string of forts in the valley. They strengthened their defences against any ground assault, erroneously believing that the Viet Minh would never be able to use artillery from the rugged mountains surrounding the valley fortifications. Over a
period of six months however, the Viet Minh hacked precipitous tracks through the rugged and inhospitable terrain to haul their artillery to dominant positions overlooking the French. Four divisions of about 51,000 Viet Minh troops surrounded the French base and, in a succession of mass human-wave assaults with artillery barrages, followed by a siege, then more overwhelming attacks, the Viet Minh were victorious in 1954.

As they were being overrun and annihilated, the French troops transmitted their last radio message from the Foreign Legion command post at Dien Bien Phu: “The enemy has overrun us. We’re blowing everything up – goodbye, our families. Adieu.” That battle, that defeat, brought an end to French rule.

Under the Geneva Peace Accords, the French pulled out of Indochina permanently and Vietnam was temporarily partitioned at the 17th parallel, with a plan for unification to be decided by vote in 1956. North of the 17th Parallel, Ho Chi Minh presided with General Vo Nguyen Giap as his military commander. To the south were mainly non-Communists, ruled by the newly appointed premier (later president) Ngo Dinh Diem.

**Lead up (1954-60) to the 2nd Vietnam War**

The election to decide if north and south were to be unified never occurred. The south argued that a free election was impossible under the conditions existing in the communist-held territory, while the north believed it could gain full control without an election because of the south's internal religious and military turmoil. Consequently, the north in flagrant breach of the Geneva agreement, began a guerrilla campaign in the south where the Viet Cong (or VC – the insurgent military arm of the South Vietnamese Communists), joined soon after by North Vietnamese Army (NVA) cadres, conducted a campaign of terror, particularly by assassination of government officials and murder within the villages. That infiltration into South Vietnam by the NVA began as early as 1959.

The United States of America (US) who, since 1950, had been supporting French Indo-China and then South Vietnam with substantial military and economic aid, introduced military advisers in 1955. US General Williams warned that the likely NVA military action would be conventional warfare with a Korean War-like invasion, so he erroneously advised the disbandment of South Vietnam’s light infantry divisions. Had these remained, the south would have been better organised to oppose the eventual insurgent-type penetration throughout their outlying regions and villages.

**The 2nd Vietnam War, ‘the American War’ (1960-73)**

In 1960, the Communist National Liberation Front (NLF) (the political arm of the VC) was formed in Hanoi to direct all operations in South Vietnam. The US increased its training advisers in response. By 1961, the situation had seriously deteriorated, so the US advisers were assigned to South Vietnamese field units to directly advise the combat commanders. By 1962, the number of US advisers and logistic support personnel had escalated to 11,000. That year was also when Australia’s military advisers were first deployed. Notwithstanding, within a few years, the NLF boasted dominance over much of the south where it gradually took control of regional areas.

In late 1963, there occurred within three weeks of each other, a *coup d’état* in South Vietnam with the assassination of President Diem and then, in the US, the assassination of President John Kennedy. Lyndon B. Johnson became the US president and was faced with the tough decision of whether to increase American involvement in Vietnam or to pull out while he still could. The deciding factor was the Tonkin Gulf incident of August 1964 when the destroyer USS _Maddox_ (conducting signals intelligence or SIGINT operations) was attacked by North Vietnamese torpedo boats allegedly in international waters.

This caused President Johnson to react dramatically with retaliatory air strikes into North Vietnam. The NVA attacked villages and military posts in the south, which in turn led to American combat units being deployed into South Vietnam in March 1965. Bombing raids on North Vietnam continued with Operation _Rolling Thunder_ and by late 1965 there were over 300,000 American troops stationed south of the 17th Parallel.

**Contributing Nations**

When the US called for international assistance, it received both logistic and combat troops. From a total of
30 nations called the ‘Free World’ Forces, only six provided combat troops – the US, South Korea, Thailand, Philippines, Australia and New Zealand. The Australian contribution peaked at over 8000 troops in 1969 for a total of over 50,000 for the war’s duration. The maximum number of US troops in Vietnam at any one time was about 550,000 in mid 1968, while South Vietnamese troops numbered over 900,000.

The Americans and the South Vietnamese Army (the ARVN – Army of the Republic of Vietnam) operated throughout South Vietnam, while the Australian and New Zealand troops remained mainly in III Corps (see Map 3) to the south-east of Saigon with its task force base at Nui Dat in Phuoc Tuy Province.

**The Enemy**

The VC referred to itself as a liberation army, aimed at overthrowing the South Vietnamese government and unifying north and south into one nation. Despite the general belief in America and Australia that it was a civil war in the south involving just the Viet Cong against the government and its forces, it was in fact both VC and North Vietnamese armies fighting there. Indeed, in effect, it was an invasion by NVA main force formations assisting regional and local VC units. Both Russia and China supported their Communist allies logistically and Russia also with military advisers.

Reinforcements and supplies for the NVA and VC combat troops mainly travelled from China and North Vietnam through the neutral neighbours, Cambodia and Laos, and then across the borders into South Vietnam. Known as the Ho Chi Minh trail, this was a network of routes with multiple entry points into South Vietnam; and was in parts like a multi-lane highway through the rugged mountains and elsewhere was just narrow jungle tracks.

**Strategies**

The enemy confronted by the Free World forces was initially quite different from that encountered in more conventional wars. This was an enemy fighting as insurgents who generally (but not always) avoided sustained confrontation with allied forces, preferring to be secreted away in its jungle and mountain hideaways and tunnel complexes, to then launch hit-and-run offensives at opportune times. The allied air superiority was a major reason for this. At times, however, the NVA/VC launched major offensives against the large towns and cities in the south. As the war progressed, the NVA became more involved in conventional warfare, particularly in I Corps where its lines of communication to North Vietnam were shorter. One attempt, the NVA’s ‘Easter Offensive’ of March 1972, was annihilated by US air strikes and bombing.

In the Australian experience, examples of major direct enemy confrontations occurred at Long Tan, Fire Support Bases Coral and Balmoral and in the village of Binh Ba.

In I Corps, the US Marines were involved in both counter-guerrilla operations and conventional warfare, where major battles sometimes occurred with tanks, infantry and artillery on both sides. Although the Americans had air supremacy there, the North Vietnamese air force did challenge US bombers over Hanoi.

By and large, American Generals Harkins’ and Westmoreland’s use of World War II firepower and aerial bombing, a strategy designed to combat the modern Soviet threat in open warfare, was inappropriate in Vietnam. Westmoreland rejected a counter-insurgency approach – he rejected the British experience from the Malay emergency and did not seek French advice from the Indo-China War. Westmoreland emphasised ‘body count’ in ‘search-and-destroy’ operations and rejected both ‘pacification’ (by winning the hearts and minds of the people) and ‘Vietnamisation’ (building military self-reliance). Westmoreland’s successor, General Abrams, reversed this with considerable success in 1969.

When the enemy did commit their large-sized units to conventional battles they were usually orchestrated to achieve maximum political and public relations advantage by coinciding it with an outside event, such as a US presidential or congressional election.

By 1968, the South Vietnamese allies had reversed the tide and were winning most of the battles as the VC and NVA sustained huge casualties. On the other hand,
the north was far more adept at swaying public opinion, effectively using public relations as a principle of war.

**The Battle of Khe Sanh**

Of all the major battles, too many to detail here, one must be mentioned — the 1968 Battle of Khe Sanh and the associated Tet Offensive of January that year.

The American base of Khe Sanh was located in a valley surrounded by mountains near the Laotian border in I Corps, and was established to cut off NVA incursions from the Ho Chi Minh Trail. On 21 January 1968, the US Marine base was attacked with a massive artillery bombardment and a siege by superior NVA numbers. The media reported that it was an NVA attempt to replicate the decisive French defeat at Dien Bien Phu where the topography was eerily similar. Despite the battle continuing for several months, General Giap later denied this objective and said it was to draw American forces away from the populated areas so that the Tet Offensive could succeed.

**The Tet Offensive of 1968**

Indeed, on 31 January 1968, 10 days after the Battle of Khe Sanh had commenced, and, in fact, had diverted American attention and troops from other areas, the NVA and VC launched a co-ordinated wave of assaults on South Vietnam's major cities and provincial capitals throughout the length of the country.

The Tet Offensive was aimed at igniting a general uprising among the population and encouraging defections from the ARVN units in order to topple the South Vietnamese government. The South Vietnam population did not revolt, however, nor did any ARVN unit defect to the north. Instead, Tet was a military disaster for the north, which suffered huge losses, but, on the other hand, it was a public relations victory for them, having a dramatic, lasting and adverse effect upon US public opinion.

The enemy not only surprised the allies by launching these assaults on a Vietnamese national public holiday, but also demonstrated the vulnerability of the South Vietnamese, initially succeeding in breaching the defences of major cities like Saigon and Hue, before being repulsed. What impacted on the American public was watching on television in their lounge rooms, the fighting in city streets while, at the same time, being told by the press that Khe Sanh could be another Dien Bien Phu disaster.

Although the Americans successfully held the Khe Sanh base, inflicted massive casualties on the enemy and claimed a military victory, the combined effect of Khe Sanh and the Tet Offensive alerted the American public to the sudden increase in casualties and the uncertainty of an allied victory, so that, for the first time, there was general public opinion against America's involvement in the war. The media battle was being lost. It was a turning point in the war, despite the Free World forces winning the battles.

In mid-1968, President Johnson lost his confidence in the military leadership and relieved Westmoreland of his command. Disillusioned by the sharp downturn of public opinion and increasing anti-war demonstrations, he announced he would not seek re-election.

**The End of the 2nd Vietnam War**

When, in 1969, newly-elected president, Richard Nixon, announced a proposed end to US involvement and the reduction of its fighting troops in 1970, Australia (Prime Minister Gorton) later followed suit by not replacing one of its home-coming infantry battalions in November 1970. Optimistically, this was on the basis of the success of Vietnamisation, i.e training the South Vietnamese troops to be self-sufficient. In mid-1971, it was announced (by Prime Minister McMahon) that the bulk of Australian forces would withdraw by December leaving just the Australian Army Training Team, but they, too, were withdrawn by new Prime Minister Whitlam in December 1972 within two weeks of his government gaining power.


This ended the 2nd Vietnam War. Allied operations ceased and US combat troops departed within two months. Controversially, NVA units were permitted to remain in place. It was now for South Vietnam to protect itself against any future enemy action. Prisoners-of-war were released by both sides.

President Thieu had been most reluctant to sign the accord, but was assured by President Nixon and his negotiator, Henry Kissinger, of continued American support if North Vietnam breached the treaty. Kissinger promised a ‘swift and brutal response’ by the US if there were a major violation. Nixon also promised continued aid in the form of $1.6 billion, but it was an empty promise as Congress would not authorise the full amount. When President Ford took office in August 1974, he also promised assistance if required, but this too was reduced by Congress.

Within no time, north and south resumed fighting. As well, from 1973 to 1975, in the absence of US troops, the NVA made preparations for finishing the war, particularly by upgrading and utilising the Ho Chi Minh Trail to position both troops and equipment.

**The 3rd Vietnam War (1975)**

In December 1974, in direct breach of the Paris peace accords, the NVA conducted a test attack into part of South Vietnam to see if the US would intervene. President Ford and the US Congress said there would be no more support, stunning Thieu and delighting Le Duan in the north. With no US intervention, the north proceeded with its plans for a major invasion. It began on 10 March 1975 in the Central Highlands, the North having calculated that the 'liberation of the South' would be concluded within two years. In fact, it took less than two months. This was despite courageous efforts by some South Vietnamese units. As Australian Colonel Ted Serong said later, 'South Vietnam simply ran out of
bullets’. The refugee exodus was massive and within weeks the south was in retreat. Towns and cities fell like a row of dominoes.

Saigon was surrounded by 20 April 1975 and fell 10 days later. Saigon was immediately renamed Ho Chi Minh City. The 3rd Vietnam War had ended. There had been neither intervention nor support by the US. There had been no peace and there was no honour.

Historians and the media have generally recorded that America lost the war, but that is not accurate. There was an agreement to stop the fighting and the allied departure was in compliance with those peace terms. At that stage, the military situation in South Vietnam was vastly improved from its dire straits of the early 1960s. Although three years after the treaty, there was a military victory by North Vietnam over the South, it is inaccurate to say that North Vietnam defeated America. The US may not have won the war, but it also did not lose it militarily.

**Conclusion**

Evacuation to Australia of South Vietnamese nationals who had worked for the Australian embassy and military headquarters in Saigon was attempted, but the Whitlam government disgracefully refused to approve the plan and inhumanly abandoned them, instead sending pacifying communiques to Hanoi. Conversely, America rescued 65,000 Vietnamese in that final month of April 1975.

Under the Marxist regime, there followed years of economic depression, famine, starvation, revenge, executions and brutal re-education camps, together with a desperate exodus of non-Communist Vietnamese ‘boat people’.

Today, Vietnam is a unified, independent and relatively economically-stable Communist nation. Any concern about Communism in Asia now focuses on the huge development, economically and militarily, of China. It is this power and its apparent policy of expansionism that causes most concern.

**The Author:** David Wilkins graduated from the Royal Military College, Duntroon, in 1963. An infantryman, he served with the 2nd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (2RAR), the Pacific Islands Regiment and 5RAR in Vietnam in 1969-70, first as the Adjutant and then as a rifle company commander. He later graduated from the Australian National University with BA, LLB (Hons) and transferred to the Army Legal Corps to be a Defence Force Magistrate and Judge Advocate for courts martial. He retired from the Australian Regular Army in 1986, practised as a barrister for 20 years and then as a tribunai member of the Veterans’ Review Board. Now retired, he was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for services to community history in the 2019 Queen’s Birthday Honours List.

**APPENDIX**

A Brief Summary of the Causes of the 2nd Vietnam War

As mentioned above, the underlying cause of the 2nd Vietnam (American) War was North Vietnam’s desire for an independent, unified Vietnam. But there were other factors, external to Vietnam, which contributed: the Cold War between the West and the Communist Block and the spread of Communism both heightened world tensions. The more immediate cause was the Tonkin Gulf Incident.

That World tension underpinned America’s involvement in Vietnam which in turn saw it draw 29 of its allies into the conflict. Incidents contributing to the tense atmosphere included: the arms race; the iron curtain; the Truman doctrine; the Berlin blockade and ‘the wall’; the Korean War; the Bay of Pigs fiasco; and the Cuban missile crisis. In response, both sides formed alliances: the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation; the Warsaw Pact; the Australia, New Zealand, United States Treaty; and the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation.

The spread of Communism in Asia was a critical factor. Key events in the lead up to the 2nd Vietnam War included: Mao Tse Tung’s defeat of Chiang Kai-Shek in 1949; the Malayan Emergency of 1948-1960; China’s ‘liberation’ of Tibet in 1951; the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954; and North Vietnam’s invasion of South Vietnam commencing in 1959. This led the United States to propound the ‘domino theory’ – if the spread of Communism southwards was not halted in Vietnam, it could open the flood gates.