

# 1962-72 VIETNAM: 'ALL THE WAY WITH LBJ'

Perhaps never in modern Australian history had one issue divided the nation as deeply and for so long as did Australia's military involvement in Vietnam.

It dragged on from July 1962, when thirty military advisers were sent to South Vietnam, until January 1972, when the last of 41 000 soldiers and 6000 Navy and Air Force personnel arrived home.

Of 423 left behind dead, and almost 3000 wounded, nearly 40 per cent had been con-scripts — victims of a war many of them did not want.

Prime Minister Menzies did not forewarn the Opposition about the momentous announcement he intended to make in Federal Parliament on 29 April 1965.

In fact, both A.L.P. leaders, Arthur Calwell, and his deputy, Gough Whitlam, were not present when the Prime Minister told the House of Representatives that Australian troops would join the war alongside American forces.

A few days later Calwell put Labor's point of view:

*We do not think it is a wise decision. We do not think it is a timely decision. We do not think it is a right decision. We do not think it will help the fight against Communism. On the contrary, we believe it will harm that fight in the long term.*

*We do not believe it will promote the welfare of the people of Vietnam. On the contrary, we believe it will prolong and deepen the suffering of that unhappy people so that Australia's very name may become a term of reproach among them. ...*

*How long will it be before we are drawing upon our conscript youth to service these growing and endless requirements?*

The answer to that question was not long in coming.

Two days after the Menzies announcement, the Treasurer, Harold Holt, returned from the United States with news that the Johnson Administration had been 'dissuaded' from clamping down on U.S. investment in Australia.

To Labor and other anti-war factions it seemed a case of trading 'Diggers for Dollars' — and this soon became one of their slogans.

On 8 March 1966 Holt, by now Prime Minister, told Parliament that Australia's forces in Vietnam would be trebled and that national servicemen would

be used to reinforce the regular troops.

The Opposition reacted sharply, pointing out that in both World Wars Australia had sent only volunteers abroad (the conscripts who had served in New Guinea and surrounding islands had been considered part of the home defence forces).

The A.L.P. undertook to abolish conscription if it won the 1966 election.

The public, however, did not share these anti-war sentiments — at least not yet — for in November Holt's Liberal-Country Party coalition was returned with a majority of forty-one seats — the largest since Federation.

Within months the Government increased Australian military participation in Vietnam to 8000. The Prime Minister, it was obvious, planned to keep his pledge of 'All the way with LBJ', made during a visit to the United States five months earlier.

Gradually, however, the impossibility of outright victory, and the seemingly needless deaths of so many often unwilling young Australians so far away from home, began to turn public opinion against the war.

Massive rallies, some erupting in violence, were held in various capitals during 1970 to protest at conscription. Dr Jim Cairns, a Labor Federal shadow Minister and one of the leaders of the Vietnam Moratorium Campaign, spoke for many Australians when he asked the nation to:

*Stop, think again and realise what is being done in Vietnam in your name and for which you are responsible.*

*Since Australian troops were sent to Vietnam, nearly one million Vietnamese, mostly civilians, have been killed, as many maimed for what life is left for them, South Vietnam has been bombed and burnt halfway back to the Stone Age, and many of its people have been corrupted or turned into prostitutes.*

*The killing and devastation is not declining. It is spreading and increasing...*

*Many people in Australia are convinced the war is an atrocity. They are convinced there is a better way of winning security for Vietnam. They are convinced the war must stop. It is then their right and duty to do something to try to stop it.*

*They believe, too, they have a right to do something that may cause others to take notice of what is happening in Vietnam and that then they, too, may say: Stop the war.*

As pressure mounted, by 1972 Australia's combat forces were gradually leaving Vietnam.

In December the newly-elected Whitlam Labor Government ordered the withdrawal of the last military advisers, dropped all defence aid to South Vietnam, and stopped the training of Cambodian military personnel in Australia.

So the war finally ended — for Australia, at least. With peace came a growing realisation that, in the words of Robert O'Neil, head of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University, 'the results

achieved were not worth the cost'. He added:

*While the intensity of public feeling about the war moderated with the conclusion of Australia's role, the Vietnam struggle has left a lasting impact on the nation which bears comparison with that of an earlier experience of fundamental importance to Australia — the war of 1914-18.*