

## Foreword

*Support for the Fleet* is the third in David Bruhn's books on the naval aspects of the war in Vietnam. It rounds out the comprehensive analysis of the Navy's contribution to the war contained in his earlier books: *On the Gunline* and *Gators Offshore and Upriver*. Support tasks are never glamorous and are usually underrated by both the services and historians. The neglect of support, including logistics, as a field of serious enquiry has generally been the norm amongst military historians, and Bruhn should be commended for extending his research to include this discipline.

His final book in the trilogy covers a wide range of support activities. The majority of the materiel supporting the Vietnam War came by sea. This included most of the ammunition and fuel as well as the supplies, vehicles, and construction resources consumed by the massive allied war effort. With primary responsibility for the sea lines of communication to Southeast Asia, the U.S. Navy oversaw the development of a 7,000 nautical mile (nm) transoceanic lifeline to U.S. forces fighting ashore, steaming in the South China Sea, and to bases throughout the Pacific. The Australian support activity was more modest, but nevertheless important because the deployed Australian forces were, for the first time, fully supported from home.

The task of moving, supplying and maintaining Australian forces in Vietnam was predominantly undertaken by the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) and ships taken up from trade from the Australian National Line (ANL). In addition, the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) maintained a regular C-130 courier service as did Australia's international airline, Qantas Airways Ltd.

HMAS *Sydney* the former aircraft carrier was the mainstay of naval logistics support operations for Australian forces in Vietnam. *Sydney* was commissioned in 1948 and was central in the development of Australia's post-war naval aviation capability. There was considerable public interest in the planned acquisition of two aircraft carriers including speculation as to the names of the carriers, which appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in December 1947, suggesting they would be named after Australian statesmen. A follow-up story suggested this had

occurred; as the Navy had advised, the first one was called *Terrible*. On transfer to the RAN, HMS *Terrible* became HMAS *Sydney*.

*Sydney* served with distinction in the Korean War, but by 1958 with the RAN facing severe financial constraints, she was placed in reserve, a mere decade after commissioning.

*Sydney* recommissioned as a fast troop transport in early 1962, with her first operational deployment in mid-1964 deploying Australian Army units to Malaysia as part of Australia's initial contribution to the Indonesian Confrontation. *Sydney* began her first voyage to Vietnam in May 1965, transporting 1st Battalion Royal Australian Regiment (RAR) from Sydney to Vung Tau.

*Sydney's* route was north through the Coral Sea then west passing south of the Philippines and north of Indonesia, a voyage of some 5,000 nm. From the Coral Sea, she sailed west through the Vitiaz Strait between New Britain and Papua New Guinea's north eastern Huon Peninsula, south of Basilan Island in the southern Philippines, then through Balabac Strait between Sabah and Palawan Island in the Philippines, and across the South China Sea to Cap St. Jacques and the port of Vung Tau. Later voyages included stops at Manus Island. RAR Battalions were embarked in Sydney, Brisbane, Townsville and Adelaide. For the Adelaide embarkation, *Sydney* sailed south about Australia and north through the Indian Ocean, through the Sunda Strait in Indonesia, transiting east of Malaysia and north to Vung Tau. From June 1969 until her final voyage, *Sydney* made her northern passage inside the Great Barrier Reef, west across northern Australia and north through the Sunda Strait and on to Vietnam.

By 1966 with Australian ground forces well established in Vietnam, *Sydney* began a regular pattern of disembarking one battalion at Vung Tau and back loading another for the return passage to Australia. In the early days *Sydney's* turnaround in Vung Tau took two days, but this was gradually reduced until, by 1967, the unloading and back loading of men and equipment generally took only half a day. She was quickly known and remembered fondly by those involved as the Vung Tau Ferry. Australia's combat role in South Vietnam ceased in March 1972 when *Sydney* brought home the last combat elements. *Sydney* returned to Vung Tau for one final visit in November 1972, when she delivered a cargo of defence aid for Vietnam and Cambodia. Between 1965 and 1972 *Sydney* undertook 24 voyages to Vietnam, transporting 16,094 troops

some 6,000 tonnes of cargo and 2,375 vehicles during this period. She was decommissioned in November 1973.

The transporting of equipment and stores in *Sydney* was supplemented by chartering two ANL cargo ships, MV *Boonaroo* and MV *Jeparit* and through the deployment of three Army landing ships medium: *Vernon Sturdee*, *Harry Chauvel* and *Clive Steele*, and the Australian Army cargo ship *John Monash*. The Army vessels were operated by 32nd Small Ships Squadron, Royal Australian Engineers.

MV *Boonaroo* completed one round-trip voyage to Vietnam in mid-1966. She was commissioned as HMAS *Boonaroo* in March 1967 after members of the Seaman's Union refused to sail the ship to Vietnam with a cargo of RAAF ordnance onboard. Following that trip, she was handed back to the ANL.

MV *Jeparit* commenced transporting equipment and supplies in mid-1966. After five voyages, some merchant seamen refused to man the vessel. To resolve this issue, crew members who were prepared to continue to serve in *Jeparit*, were supplemented by a RAN detachment. Following *Jeparit's* 26th round voyage to Vietnam, further industrial trouble developed and the ship was commissioned as HMAS *Jeparit* in December 1969. She continued to operate with a mixed merchant navy/RAN crew until she was handed back to the ANL in March 1972, having completed a total of 38 trips to Vietnam.

The significant efforts of *Sydney* and *Jeparit* made the Australian contribution to the war possible because they transported infantry battalions, supporting units, stores and equipment to and from Vietnam. The other units involved were an essential adjunct to the primary logistics support activity, and their role was vital to the successful maintenance of the Australian forces in Vietnam.

The logistic support function provided by Australia for its forces during the Vietnam War was important for two reasons. Firstly, it maintained the Australian air and ground commitment in the field and perhaps more importantly for the long term, it demonstrated for the first time that Australia was capable of transporting, maintaining and reinforcing a significant ground and air force at a distance, for a prolonged period of time with and from its own resources.

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