

Vietnam and the Australian Tunnel Rats

Following the end of World War II an anti-colonial sentiment swept many former colonies from the control of their former masters. In 1954 the French were defeated by the Vietnamese at Dien Bien Phu thus ending French control over Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Ho Chi Minh, a Vietnamese nationalist, set about unifying Vietnam. Ho was also a communist and he agitated for communist cadres to take over in neighbouring Laos and Cambodia. The USA, fearful that communism would spread to other Asian countries, propped up the South Vietnamese government. At first USA aid took the form of military aid but finally in 1965, US troops were committed to fight in Vietnam. Australia, as a US ally also committed troops to the war but Australian troops were withdrawn in 1972.

While most Australians know the conflict as the Vietnam War, the Vietnamese label the conflict the American War. Historians who recognise that the war also engulfed Cambodia and Laos entitle the conflict the Second Indo-Chinese War. MiVAC acknowledges and respects these different perspectives.

Australian Army Engineers were charged with neutralizing booby traps, destroying UXBs and searching tunnels. A little known fact is that Australian Engineers of 3 Field Troop operating with 1RAR and the American 173rd Brigade were the first to experience tunnel warfare in Vietnam. During Operation Crimp, Australians came under fire from snipers inside what appeared to be an ant hill that wounded two soldiers and killed two medics. Inspection of the mound uncovered a network of tunnels that Australian sappers entered and investigated. – these are now known as the Cu CHI tunnels which today are famous and form part of a huge National Tourist attraction. The Commanding Officer was Captain Sandy MacGregor, MiVAC's patron. The Tunnel rats were born.

Later, at Nui Dat, Australians built a huge barrier minefield which was penetrated by the Viet Cong (mainly young women and girls) who recovered the dangerous M16 Jumping Jack mine and used it against Australian soldiers. Half the Killed in Action and half the Wounded in action being battle casualties came from these mines in the years 1967 to 1971. Sappers know the devastation that these mines – today called IEDs (improvised explosive device) – caused in Vietnam and now in Iraq and Afghanistan can cause.