

# 'EDUCATING AN ARMY':

AUSTRALIAN ARMY DOCTRINAL DEVELOPMENT  
AND THE OPERATIONAL EXPERIENCE  
IN SOUTH VIETNAM, 1965-72



R. N. Bushby



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Cover photograph: Australian War Memorial Neg. No.COM/69/0250/VN, Phuoc Tuy Province, South Vietnam, 18 April 1969. Photographer Sergeant David Combe. Two members of C Company, 9th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment, forcing their way through thick jungle, supported by a Centurian tank of B Squadron, 1st Armoured Regiment, Royal Australian Armoured Corps, search for Viet Cong during Operation Surfside.

## ABSTRACT

This monograph examines the way in which the Australian Army met the challenges to its doctrine presented by the Vietnam War. The war produced some widely varied tactical problems, and the flexibility and deep experience which were the hallmarks of the army in the 1960s provide the key to understanding how these problems were solved.

After surveying the origins of the Australian Army's counter-revolutionary warfare doctrine, the monograph examines in detail the challenges to and development of this doctrine in the four periods of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War: working alongside US forces (May 1965-June 1966); the establishment of the independent task force (May 1966-January 1968); the period of 'out of province' operations (January 1968-June 1969); and the final period of Vietnamisation and pacification. The developments in tactics and doctrine of the Vietnam War period marked a substantial step in the process of developing Australian Army doctrine - a process which is worthy of study as, at the turn of the century, the army develops new doctrine and concepts to meet the challenges of the future.

**Richard Bushby** joined the Australian Army in 1993 and graduated from the Australian Defence Force Academy in 1995. In 1996 he graduated from the Royal Military College, Duntroon into the Royal Australian Infantry Corps. In 1997 he returned to the Defence Force Academy to undertake honours study, achieving first class honours in history. In 1998 he was posted, as a rifle platoon commander, to the 3rd Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment.

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Finally, I would like to thank my parents for five years of support and encouragement. This monograph is dedicated to them.

Richard Bushby

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## ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

|           |   |
|-----------|---|
| ADFA      | Australian Defence Force Academy                                  |
| AIF       | Australian Imperial Force   |
| AMF       | Australian Military Forces  |
| ANZAM     | Australian, New Zealand and Malayan area<br>(Agreement)           |
| APC       | armoured personnel carrier  |
| ARVN      | Army of the Republic of Vietnam                                   |
| ATF       | Australian Task Force   |
| ATOM      | <i>The Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations in Malaya</i>         |
| AWM       | Australian War Memorial   |
| BCFESR    | British Commonwealth Far East Strategic Reserve                   |
| BM        | brigade major   |
| CGS       | Chief of the General Staff  |
| CMF       | Citizen Military Force  |
| CO        | commanding officer  |
| COMAFV    | Commander, Australian Force Vietnam                               |
| COMUSMACV | Commander, United States Military Assistance<br>Command, Vietnam  |
| CORDS     | Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development<br>Support (US)    |
| CRW       | counter-revolutionary warfare                                     |
| CT        | communist terrorist   |
| DCGS      | Deputy Chief of the General Staff                                 |
| DDMT      | Deputy Director of Military Training                              |
| DF        | defensive fire  |
| DMO&P     | Directorate of Military Operations and Plans                      |
| DMT       | Director of Military Training<br>Directorate of Military Training |
| DS        | direct support  |
| FAC       | forward air controller  |
| FARELF    | Far East Land Force   |
| FCC       | fire control centre   |
| FO        | forward observer  |
| GHQ       | general headquarters  |
| HEAT      | high-explosive anti-tank  |
| HQ        | headquarters  |

|       |                                      |
|-------|--------------------------------------|
| JTC   | Jungle Training Centre               |
| LFT   | light fire team                      |
| LZ    | landing zone                         |
| MAC-V | Military Assistance Command, Vietnam |
| MFC   | mobile fire controller               |
| MLW   | <i>Manual of Land Warfare</i>        |
| NCO   | non-commissioned officer             |
| RAAF  | Royal Australian Air Force           |
| RAOC  | Royal Army Ordnance Corps            |
| RAR   | Royal Australian Regiment            |
| RCL   | recoilless rifle                     |
| RF/PF | regional force/popular force         |
| RPG   | rocket-propelled grenade             |
| SAS   | Special Air Service                  |
| SEATO | South East Asia Treaty Organisation  |
| SOP   | standard operating procedure         |
| SWPA  | South West Pacific Area              |
| TAOR  | tactical area of responsibility      |
| UHF   | ultra high frequency                 |
| USAF  | United States Air Force              |
| VC    | Viet Cong                            |

## INTRODUCTION

Military doctrine<sup>1</sup> provides one of the essential touchstones in the functioning of any military organisation. Alongside tradition and history, doctrine provides one of the most concrete expressions of an army's *raison d'être*, and thus defines many of the organisation's professional characteristics. In achieving this, doctrine can be regarded by the inexperienced or ill informed as an inflexible monolith, by which the character and form of military operations are prescribed directly in accordance with a nation's higher strategy. While this perspective ascribes to military doctrine a rigidity and inflexibility inappropriate in modern war, it suggests the way in which military operations at even the lowest level reflect the higher national and military policies on which they are based.<sup>2</sup> Roger Spiller, although writing about the US Army, could easily have described the Australian Army of the mid-1960s when he noted that:

Military doctrines, fighting doctrines, always have been expressions of their time and place, an artefact in the mental life of a fighting organisation. Any armed force operates in accordance with a conception of war that has been formed as a consequence of its history, the state of military knowledge available at the time, the material and technical assets at hand, the objectives to which the force expects to be committed, and, certainly not least, the calibre of those who must attempt to give it life in battle.<sup>3</sup>

All the factors listed above are apparent in an examination of the Australian Army's doctrine before and during the Vietnam War, and it was these factors along with several others which shaped the development of Australian Army tactics throughout the period.

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1 A general definition of 'doctrine' is found within the Oxford dictionary: 'doctrine: what is taught, or a body of instruction'. Military doctrine specifically is defined by the Australian Joint Service Glossary as 'the fundamental principles by which military forces or elements thereof guide their actions in support of national objectives. It is authoritative, but requires judgement in its application'.

2 Roger J. Spiller, 'In the Shadow of the Dragon: Doctrine and the US Army after Vietnam' in Jeffrey Grey and Peter Dennis (eds), *From Past to Future: The Australian Experience of Land/Air Operations* (Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra, 1995), p.6.

3 *ibid.*, p.7.

## 2 'Educating an Army'

This monograph concerns itself with the Australian Army's tactical doctrine during the Vietnam War. Doctrine operates at several levels, but even at the lowest level, the tactical, there exist strata and a hierarchy formed by the relationship between junior and senior commanders which shapes the nature of operations on the ground. At the level of the lowest tactical sub-unit, the platoon or even the section, doctrine is better described as minor tactics, while at a higher level doctrine encompasses the application of higher tactics or operational method to combat operations. For the Australians in Vietnam, the exercise of higher level tactics was the responsibility of the battalion or task force commander, and although these figures operated at a level considerably higher than the platoon or section commander they rarely, if ever, functioned at the operational or strategic level of war.

*The Division in Battle* series of pamphlets was the published expression of the army's doctrine in 1965.<sup>4</sup> The traditional role of doctrine is to provide guides for action or to suggest methods that might work best. Because the body of doctrine with which the war was fought was written prior to the army's commitment to Vietnam, it was designed to cover a range of scenarios, locations and types of operations, and not just, or even primarily, those conditions found in Vietnam. As a result of six and a half years of continuous military involvement in Vietnam, some army personnel came to equate doctrine with the system of specific tactics and techniques employed in Vietnam. For example, there are numerous instances throughout the literature of commanders referring to new techniques as departures from or variations to doctrine. What they are in fact referring to are merely changes to tactics and techniques established previously, within the overall guiding framework of tactical doctrine.

Former commanding officers drawn together by the Infantry Centre in 1972, at the end of the Australian commitment to Vietnam, commented that

The Australian war in Vietnam was unusual in that it gave us five periods of 12 months in which the nature and pattern of operations was so varied that it is difficult to produce lessons with broad application to either counter revolutionary war or

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<sup>4</sup> Australian Army, Military Board, *The Division in Battle*, Pamphlets Nos 1-11 (Army Headquarters, Canberra, 1965-70).

limited war ... due to changes in conditions and the enemy threat over the years.<sup>5</sup>

Just as these different periods made it difficult to draw out lessons with broad application to the army after the war, they also make it very difficult to trace the development of doctrine during the war. The widely varying nature of operations conducted by the Australians during their six-and-a-half-year presence in Vietnam provided some inherently contradictory experiences. To resolve these apparent contradictions it is necessary to examine certain influences on the development of doctrine:

- Australian doctrine during the Vietnam period was influenced profoundly by the pre-war experiences of the army in the Malayan Emergency, which continued to have an effect long into the period of the Australian commitment to Vietnam.
- Small-group tactics have always held a fascination for doctrine writers and for the Australian Army generally. The employment of small groups for tasks such as patrolling, ambushing and searching has long been the method with which the army has felt most comfortable.
- Until late in the Australian involvement in the Vietnam War, the distribution of relevant tactical information and guidance on tactical developments suffered from a lack of centralised direction or control.
- Australia, as a minor member of the American-dominated Free World forces in Vietnam, placed sovereign forces under the operational command of American commanders whose view of the war differed significantly from that of the Australians.
- Pressure, such as that described above, from higher commanders restricted the freedom of action available to Australian commanders and thus at times helped to shape the way forces reacted on the ground.
- Australian operational methods were altered by changing and differing perceptions on the part of our own national

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Australian Army, SO1(GS) Directorate of Infantry, 'Infantry Battalion Lessons from Vietnam', Infantry Centre, Ingleburn, 1972, p.1.