

In Their Own Words - Commanding Officers

Elmo R Zumwalt Jr: ‘As a former Commander of US Naval forces in Vietnam (1968-1970) and later as a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1970-1974, I am keenly aware of the magnificent contribution and great sacrifice of Australian Vietnam veterans.’

‘I know that there are many of those veterans whose service is not recognised, due to the fact that their duties were of a transitory nature and did not incur enough ‘danger’ to merit award of the Campaign Medal.’

‘I believe that the nature of duty in Vietnam was such that anyone stationed there was truly in danger. Indeed, numerous casualties occurred in Saigon and other so-called pacified areas.’

‘I strongly recommend that any service in Vietnam be acknowledged as sufficient to merit the award of a Campaign Medal.’¹

F P (Ted) Serong: ‘My first arrival in Vietnam was mid-April 1962. At that time the war was fully ongoing. Passage up and down river, to and from Saigon by warships was a tactical operation conducted as such - an operation of war. This had been the long, ongoing status at that date, and, from my later knowledge, for many months before.’²

Sir Anthony Synnot: ‘In January 1962, HMAS *Vampire* under my command visited Saigon in company with HMAS *Quickmatch*. There is no doubt that Vietnam was on a war-footing at this time and we were required to take all necessary precautions.’³

Frank R Woods: ‘In January 1963 HMAS *Queenborough* under my command and HMAS *Quiberon* deployed to Nha Trang in South Vietnam. During the two days at Nha Trang landing parties, twenty from each ship, landed to inspect a South Vietnamese Ranger Training Centre at Duc My, some 50 kilometres up country where some members of the Australian Army Training Team in Vietnam were stationed. It was obligatory for all personnel to be armed, as ambushes by the Viet Cong were by no means uncommon in the area. The parties travelled in convoy with US and South Vietnamese escorts.’

‘During the four-hour passage up the Saigon River and armed patrol craft and spotter aircraft to detect signs of threat from the river bank were provided. After berthing at Saigon 24-hour security measures were provided to both ships by

¹ Letter from Admiral Elmo R Zumwalt Jr. USN (Rtd), 18 April 1989.

² Deposition by Brigadier F P (Ted) Serong DSO, OBE, (Rtd), 17 Feb. 1999.

³ Letter from Admiral Sir Anthony M Synnot KBE, AO, RAN (Rtd), 24 April 1993.

South Vietnamese authorities. As Vietnam was definitely on a war footing during the deployment to Vietnam of RAN ships in 1962 and 1963, the real possibility of threats existed from a number of sources.’⁴

G J B ‘Buster’ Crabb: ‘In replying to your recent letters I would explain that I do not have secretarial backing and so I would apologise for my presentation at the outset and from here on, I hope you will bear with me.’

‘HMAS *Sydney* had been out of commission for a number of years when I was appointed to her. In fact, I clearly remember sitting on one of her propellers to have a rest when I was doing an underwater diving course in the harbour. It was a very rough seat.’

‘As I recall, the next thing that I knew was that people were talking about Vietnam. Army officers started looking the ship over, and I was asked whether I could take the ship up to Saigon. After studying the chart with my navigating officer, we decided that we could get the ship to Saigon but doubted whether the Viet Minh would allow us to get down again. The Navy Board said that the French carriers had done it many times. I replied that they did not have to do it in the face of the enemy. The Board told my navigator to fly to Saigon and have a close look at the river. When he came back, I did not even ask him what he thought, as it was my personal responsibility, and I was not going to hazard my ship in that fashion. I don’t think that any other commanding officer was faced with this question, as all subsequent voyages terminated at Vung Tau harbour.’⁵

‘FOCAF (Morrison) brought a sizeable piece of the RAN around to the China sea to escort me into Vung Tau harbour. I think that he, if nobody else, realised how lonely and concerned I felt on both trips (1965). I took very little sleep whilst the troops were on board and had no one to whom I could talk. As a matter of interest, I did not go to sleep at any time we were inside the harbour. The main threats were all those which the enemy were most proficient at, and I was determined that he was not going to catch me out. I was not going to be responsible for losing Australian soldiers. But there did not seem to be the same feeling back at Navy Office where, after the first trip, the usual staff reminders, rebukes and directives began to flow.’⁶

David W Leach: ‘I have in front of me my night order books of *Vendetta* and very briefly the events of the two periods were as follows.’

⁴ Letter from Commander Frank R Woods RAN (Rtd) 24 June 1994.

⁵ Letter from Rear Admiral G J B (Buster) Crabb CBE, DSC, RAN (Rtd) 21 March 2000.

⁶ Letter from Rear Admiral G J B (Buster) Crabb CBE, DSC, RAN (Rtd), 30 October 2000.

‘Monday 20 September 1965 *Vendetta* and *Duchess* escorting *Sydney*, Subic to Cap St Jacques. 3rd degree of A/S and A/A readiness, S Band and H/F silenced, Ships darkened. Wed. 24 at Cap St Jacques. Thursday 30 Sept.- 3 October, at Hong Kong with *Duchess*, *Sydney* having proceeded independently to Australia.’

Wednesday 25 May 1966. Departed Sydney, *Vendetta* escorting *Sydney*. Saturday 28 May, Jomard Passage, 4th Degree of Readiness. Monday 30 May, Manus to Cap St Jacques. 3rd degree of A/A and SU Readiness, H/F, M/F and X Band silenced. Thursday 2, Friday 3 June, joined by *Melbourne* and *Yarra*, 5/6 June, *Melbourne* & *Yarra* detached, *Derwent* joined. 6 June, at Cap St Jacques, Awkward State 2. Divers conducted bottom search at midnight. 7 June, Awkward State 2. 8 June – 11 June, Cap St Jacques to Hong Kong in company with *Sydney*.

‘When at anchor, cable buoyed in order to slip anchor and get underway quickly in an emergency. Divers employed searching ships bottom in case of enemy placing limpet charges. Scare charges were dropped at intervals and boat patrols area of ships. Sonar switched on. At 3rd Degree of Readiness - weapons manned. Threat was considered to be from swimmer attack or floating mines.’⁷

‘I can confirm that the Standing Orders for Vietnam Voyages are the orders sent to escorts before departure. Any additions or further information was sent to the escorts by signal - it takes me back re-reading them!’⁸

‘I have read your work and compliment you on all your research. I found it most interesting. Like you I was very disappointed in the book *Up Top*.’⁹

Eric J Peel: ‘We anchored in port in Vietnam (1967) amongst a lot of merchant ships, about a mile offshore. We were closer distance to the VC rockets than the airfield - they used to go over constantly - and there were ships at anchor in the port being sunk by limpet mines. I had the guns manned, not that that would have been much help - we only had Bofors. People were warned that we might be hit – you never say that you might be sunk - that’s defeatism. Civil servants just don’t seem to care.’¹⁰

Sir James Willis: ‘I can understand the frustration of some former sailors in seeking Repatriation benefits. There was an element of danger, but in the absence of casualties it is difficult to claim ‘danger’ to support a claim, unless it

⁷ Letter from Vice Admiral David W Leach AC, CBE, LVO, RAN (Rtd), 21 February 2000.

⁸ Letter from Vice Admiral David W Leach AC, CBE, LVO, RAN (Rtd), 16 October 2000.

⁹ Letter from Vice Admiral David W Leach AC, CBE, LVO, RAN (Rtd), 11 November 2011

¹⁰ Extract from a television interview with Captain E J Peel DSC RAN (Rtd) U/D. CO HMAS *Sydney* 1966-68.

can be shown that the individual actually suffered from some form of mental distress or that the living conditions were such that they caused some physical condition, particularly if either of these disabilities has persisted.’¹¹

J L W (Red) Merson: ‘Defence watches were closed up prior to arrival at Vung Tau. HMAS *Sydney* anchored between 1-2 miles offshore whilst in Vung Tau Harbour. Escorts, including *Yarra* and *Vampire*, when escorting *Sydney* in 1966, were at anchor while in harbour. It was normal practice for an escort to sweep ahead of *Sydney* to ensure her entry was safe and her anchorage clear. *Vampire*’s cable was buoyed. The purpose of buoying the cable is, of course, to enable it to be slipped in an emergency and to facilitate recovery of the anchor at a later stage. Ship’s divers would have been employed in the protection of the ship and to possibly assist them in *Sydney* for bottom search. It was practice to use scare charges at intermittent intervals as a deterrent to possible enemy swimmers.

‘I can categorically state that it was universally recognised there was a material threat not only to HMAS *Sydney*, which was a primary and strategic target of great potential value to the Viet Cong, but to all naval units while in Vung Tau. Undoubtedly it was the possibility of attack by underwater swimmers that was predominant, but the proximity of the anchorage of all naval units, including *Sydney*, to the shoreline, did not rule out the possibility of mortar or rocket attack.’¹²

‘I was pleased to receive your letter of 11th October regarding service in HMAS *Sydney* and escorts. Vietnam 1965-72.’ --- ‘What a pity that Jeffrey Grey did not make similar efforts before *Up Top* went to print.’

‘I am sure the Standing Orders for the Vietnam deployments of HMAS *Sydney* and escorts to which you referred, were produced, I imagine, early in the piece and remained the basic doctrine for all the voyages.’

‘Passage instructions as listed were standard procedure, and the details under Terminal Port Instructions were well known and basically followed by HMAS *Sydney* and HMAS *Vampire* when under my command.’

‘An indication of the high state of readiness of ships not only in Vung Tau but on passage can be gauged by the following extract from my Report of Proceedings, HMAS *Vampire* during Voyage No: 3.’ (1966)

¹¹ Letter from Vice Admiral Sir James Willis KBE, AO, RAN (Rtd), 14 February 2000.

¹² Letter from Commodore J L W (Red) Merson OAM, RAN (Rtd), 25 April 2000.

‘Later in the day (1st May) the force (*Melbourne, Sydney, Vampire, Yarra*) transited Basilan Strait and the following morning passed through Balabac Strait and into the South China Sea. The passage was made in conditions of radio and radar silence, with ships darkened and crews at Defence Stations.’

‘At 0645 (4th May) *Vampire* detached to patrol the seaward approach to Cap St Jacques, whilst *Sydney*, preceded by *Yarra*, entered Vung Tau and anchored in their relevant anchor berths at 0825. The unloading of motor transport and stores from *Sydney* commenced shortly after arrival and continued unabated throughout the short visit.’

‘Operation Awkward State 2 was assumed on anchoring, sentries patrolled the upper deck, and constant boat patrols around all ships were maintained. Scare charges were dropped from both the ships and boats at regular intervals during periods of weak tidal stream. Although these precautions were carried out under operational conditions it afforded valuable training for the ship’s divers who carried out bottom searches on each occasion of slack water.’¹³

John Stevens: ‘Operation Orders. There was a standard format for Op Orders which must have been held by all participants, units (fill in the blanks type of thing for each operation). The format was intended to cover a wide range of operations. I am unable to take you through the individual paragraphs, but a communicator would be able to. I can interpret enough of pages you sent me to see that their purpose is to hide the presence of the ships while they make their way to Vung Tau, but once they are there (and visual) some electronic relaxations are acceptable. You have done very well to dig that out of the system.’¹⁴

Neil McDonald: ‘With reference to your letter of 11 October 2000, I confirm that, to the best of my recollections the enclosed instructions were the Standing Orders for Vietnam deployments.’

HMAS *Vampire* under my command joined HMAS *Sydney* at sea, and while I have no distinct recollection of receiving the orders, it is highly likely that they were transferred at sea by line. They certainly make a lot sense, and *Vampire* would have complied with them to the letter unless modified in any way by CTG 327.’¹⁵

Rodney T Nott: ‘As the number of Australian Army and RAAF personnel serving in Vietnam increased so did the RAN’s commitment. Fleet Air Arm

¹³ Letter from Commodore J L W (Red) Merson OAM, RAN (Rtd), 26 October 2000.

¹⁴ Letter from Rear Admiral John Stevens RAN (Rtd), 24 March 2004.

¹⁵ Letter from Rear Admiral Ian McDonald AO, RAN (Rtd), 15 October 2000.

pilots and ground staff joined 9 Squadron RAAF, and the US Army 135th Helicopter Company, while Navy Clearance divers deployed to Vung Tau. Whilst off the coast RAN Guided Missile destroyers, on attachment to the US 7th Fleet, provided Naval Gun Fire Support missions in support of ground forces.’

‘The increase in service personnel on the ground in Vietnam demanded more of HMAS *Sydney* as a personnel and war equipment carrier, in other words a Logistic Sea Transport support ship. During her seven years as the *Port Jackson - Vung Tau Ferry* she transported, safely and on time, over 15,000 service personnel to and from Vietnam, and thousands of tons of stores and equipment.’

‘HMAS *Sydney* was always escorted into and from Vung Tau by one or more RAN units to protect her from attack by the Viet Cong. Australian and US military command always considered her a prime target whilst at anchor in Vung Tau, and considerable defensive effort was deployed to keep her from harms way. In all, 11 RAN ships, some up to six times, were deployed to escort *Sydney* to and from Vietnam and protect her whilst at anchor.’¹⁶

Geoffrey Loosli: ‘It is always easy for historians such as Jeffrey Grey to assert that over the period there was no recorded attack of any kind on either *Sydney* or her escorts therefore there was no danger. That could also be said about my six months on the *Gunline* in *Brisbane* and some of the other DDG deployments. And when this appears in an ‘official history’ the DVA grasps it as gospel. It refuses to listen to claims that the possibility of attack was always there and as such required preventative measures to be taken and all onboard to be fully aware they could be going into danger.’ (30 May 1967 & 3 February 1968).

‘I have no hesitation in saying that I made it a constant theme that all onboard *Stuart* had to be fully committed to the part they had to play in having the ship ready to respond to attack from the air, from the surface or from under water. We had the sensors and the weapons, and they had to be fully functioning and the crews ready to operate them at a moment’s notice whenever we were in a danger area. This could make people tense, and at times apprehensive, and individuals could be affected in different ways - to some it would be nothing but to others the imagination might run amok. For instance, those in engine and boiler rooms would be very alert to any unusual noise when they knew there could be danger from mines.’

¹⁶ Letter from Lt. Cdr. Rodney T Nott MBE, RFD, RAN (Rtd), 11 December 2011.

‘Half the armament was closed up ready to respond should any fire come from the shore. The anchorages were about a mile from the shore and it was possible for relatively light weapons to be moved clandestinely into a position by the VC to mount an attack and then scurry away. That it never happened did not detract from the possibility that it could happen on your watch, so precautions were put in place. --- I can only emphasise that both *Sydney* and her escort were vulnerable to unsophisticated attack by a determined group of men and any successful attack which achieved any damage, no matter how small, would reverberate around the Pacific. The prospect must have been tempting. Ship’s companies had to be alert to prevent any attempt being successful and take every precaution.’

‘The ship’s divers had the most difficult and dangerous work to do. One of my diving officers recalls vividly that he felt obliged to be the first into the water. The waters were muddy and visibility not more than a few feet, the current not slow and increasing. He dived on the propellers and said he sat on the shaft scared s.....s! Eventually he completed his task and the rest of the diving team went on with theirs. It was a dangerous occupation even though there were no attempts by the enemy to place explosives on the hull or to float explosives downstream.’¹⁷

‘The Standing Orders you have unearthed appear to cover all aspects of the instructions to ships from the time of entering the ‘Market Time’ area until departure. Any instructions for the passage prior to this time would be of little consequence.’¹⁸

Andrew Robertson: ‘As I recall it we closed-up at Defence watches the night before arrival (26-12-1967) as we headed towards the Vietnamese coast - gun hoists and Ready Use loaded. We assumed State 1ZA in the early morning of arrival before reverting again to Defence watches. This would be primarily to make certain everything was operational, and personnel were alert to the possibilities in the war zone we were entering. We were well within mortar range of possible Viet Cong positions which concerned me somewhat. As I recall the Viet Cong had mortared shipping at an earlier date. HMAS *Yarra* anchored but buoyed the cable so that if we were attacked we could slip and get away within seconds. Throughout our stay we carried out Operation Awkward against possible swimmer attack on *Sydney* or *Yarra*.’

‘Regarding State 1ZA, in *Yarra* we also carried out certain intelligence operations off the coast of Vietnam while enroute to Hong Kong. As I recall it

¹⁷ Letter from Rear Admiral R Geoffrey Loosli CBE, RAN (Rtd), 10 March 2000.

¹⁸ Letter from Rear Admiral R Geoffrey Loosli CBE, RAN (Rtd), 13 October 2000.

we went to State 1ZA on one occasion and were at Defence Stations for a day off the coast.’¹⁹

‘I was disturbed to read para 11 of the Minute N90/37115 concerning the escorts, which is far from the truth, at least in my experience. I suppose who drafted the Minute had to deduce from ROPs what happened. We in *Yarra* were not exercising in the area or in transit but were requested from C in C to escort HMAS *Sydney* and adjusted our program accordingly. Following mortar attacks in Vung Tau harbour and the activities of frogmen an escort was considered essential. Reconstructing history is an inexact and difficult pastime.’²⁰

‘As far as I can see (and it certainly twiggged my memory of 27 years ago!) these are the ‘Standing Orders for HMAS *Sydney* and Escorts for Vietnam Voyages’ or similar title.’²¹

‘In time of war one never knows when the enemy may introduce new weapon systems or tactics, and the sudden intervention of other nations - (e.g., China in Korea) can bring in a huge new threat suddenly. Therefore, naval commanders, if they are wise, take precautions so that they are not caught unprepared. In Vietnam while the North Vietnamese did not possess submarines, major surface vessels, or long-range aircraft there was always the chance that they would get them from other nations or other nations would join in the war. So ship movements are kept secret in the approaches and great care is taken against radio intercepts less operations are compromised.’²²

Frank Woods: ‘On 5th of April 1968 *Parramatta* departed Singapore to make rendezvous with HMAS *Sydney* at the eastern end of Balabac Strait on 7th of April. During passage to Vung Tau across the South China Sea *Parramatta* with the aid of ASW helicopters formed a screen ahead of *Sydney*.’

‘On 8th of April some eight hours before entering the Market Time Area *Parramatta* assumed the third degree of readiness in preparation for going into Defence watches. The ship closed-up at Defence watches about 100nm from Vung Tau on entering the Market Time Area. *Parramatta* assumed the third degree of readiness in preparation for going into defence watches.’

‘The ship would have assumed the normal procedure of State 1 Condition Zulu Alpha on entering and leaving Vung Tau harbour. The highest state of water

¹⁹ Letter from Rear Admiral Andrew J Roberson AO, DSC, RAN (Rtd), 15 August 1997.

²⁰ Letter from Rear Admiral Andrew J Robertson AO, DSC, RAN (Rtd), 24 February 1998.

²¹ Letter from Rear Admiral Andrew J Robertson AO, DSC, RAN (Rtd), 17 October 2000.

²² Letter from Rear Admiral Andrew J Roberson AO, DSC, RAN (Rtd), 15 March 2004.

tight integrity is required in the case of collision, grounding, and the risk of underwater explosion.’

‘It was normal practice to use an anchor buoy attached to the anchor to indicate on the surface the position of the anchor. This would also indicate the lay of cable, assist boat traffic and ship’s divers if required.’

‘Ship’s divers were involved in Operation Awkward which was implemented at Vung Tau against the threat of underwater swimmers. Divers would have carried out a search of the ship’s hull to detect any limpet mines as a normal part of Operation Awkward.’

‘The ship remained in Defence watches whilst in Vung Tau, so armament and sensors would have been manned and ready to operate. At the anchorage the main threat was from underwater swimmers planting limpets on the ship’s hull, but precautions were also taken against air or surface threat.’

‘Tactical doctrine for RAN ships required them to train and operate in a multi threat environment. At the time in the South China Sea there could have been an air, surface, and sub-surface threat. In the above deployment, *Parramatta* with ASW helicopters from *Sydney*, screened the troop carrier against submarines. The Soviet Union had over 100 submarines in their Pacific fleet, and the PRC had a large submarine fleet as well, and this could not be ignored. In the event of a submarine attack it would have been difficult to identify its origin.’

‘The surface threat could have been from fast missile carrying patrol boats. A surface radar and visual watch was maintained as well as a long-range air warning radar watch. An escort for the troop carrier would have to be prepared to engage an enemy in any of these situations. Threats taken seriously can usually be countered by preventative measures.’

‘Ships train in exhaustive work-up programs to become efficient fighting units. In deployments such as that to Vung Tau, ship’s companies work long hours in arduous conditions and need to be prepared for any eventuality.’²³

Alan Robertson: ‘While HMAS *Duchess* was at anchor in Vung Tau (20 Nov.1968), we had divers in the water. The river (or tidal stream) was running very fast and we were concerned that the VC would float explosives down to catch our cable, or otherwise mine the ship. Alternatively, they might put their own divers in the water to kill our divers or place limpets on the hull.’

In addition to these threats, there was also the threat of VC artillery which the Army told us had only the day before (19 Nov.1968) shelled the Australian base

²³ Letter from Cdr Frank Woods RAN (Rtd), 22 February 2000.

at Vung Tau, and they believed it was still in the area, just over the hill to the west of the Australian camp.’

‘Regarding problems with the Repatriation Department, this is all consistent with the view taken in Canberra that service in the Navy was not dangerous, or even warlike, nor that the Navy did anything useful. As for the historian Jeffrey Grey, I have taken him to task for his views on Confrontation, after he had swallowed the Army line that the battalion sent to Borneo in March 1965 (and it was all over effectively after the PKI’s attempt at a coup in August that year) was the real Australian contribution. This view omits the fact that the Navy was in it and fighting from the start. But the history is published, and no one wants to be confused with facts.’²⁴

Timothy A Fischer: ‘At the outset, I remain absolutely underwhelmed with the Pentagon response over the years to the killing of two Australian sailors on *Hobart* off the coast of Vietnam during the Vietnam War.’

‘On the more general issue, there is no doubt that HMAS *Sydney* and various Australian navy ships in support played a major role in active combat zones during the Vietnam war, especially around the Vung Tau area.’

‘Quite apart from the major logistical changeover operations, when infantry battalions and other units were being rotated, there was enemy activity in the proximity on more than one occasion, and the threat of enemy activity on all occasions throughout the duration of Australian Naval operations in Vietnam waters.’

‘As one soldier who returned in HMAS *Sydney* in the first half of 1969, I readily recall the active diving work and other precautions being taken against Vietcong attacks by way of floating mines and light boat.’²⁵

John Goble: ‘I note the ‘No Casualties’ excuse being used by the Department and I believe it is completely wrong. The matter of casualties seems to derive from the introduction of the terms ‘Warlike’ and ‘Non-warlike’ in 1997. These terms were said to provide certainty in future deployments, and are now being used retrospectively, despite the specific declaration of an Operational Area relating to Vietnam and its coastline.’

‘I do not have ready access to the VEA relating to Vietnam, but I believe there is an Operational Area defined in Schedule 2, and I have always understood that the fact of a person’s service in an Operational Area, gave rise to an entitlement

²⁴ Letter from Commodore J Alan Robertson RAN (Rtd) 28 February 2000.

²⁵ Email letter from Timothy A Fischer AC, former 2nd Lt., 1st Battalion RAR, 19 September 2007.

for full-benefits without any consideration of incurring danger. After all there were many members of the Army and Air Force support elements who did not go into the field, or into the air, and yet were brought under the full provisions of the VEA. It may be that they were 'Allotted' and this was sufficient, but no one allotted the RAN elements. There is no doubt that all servicemen were at risk by being in the Operational Area.'²⁶

'I can be specific in some of the matters because I still have diary notes made at the time. After taking part in RN Fleet activities and port visits on the west coast of Malaysia, *Vampire* was detached and sailed on Wednesday, 14 May (1969) from SNB to rendezvous with HMAS *Sydney* south of Sunda Strait.'

'On 18 May both ships were crossing the Singapore/Hong Kong shipping route. At 1600 *Vampire* assumed Defence Stations remaining in this state until 1800 on Monday 19 May when well clear of the coast of South Vietnam.'

'At 0530 on Monday, 18 May, *Vampire* was detached ahead to the anchorage at Vung Tau arriving off Cape St Jacques in heavy rain. After checking that the anchorage position for HMAS *Sydney* was clear of other ships, *Vampire* anchored using an anchor buoy, and, in addition to remaining in Defence Stations assumed Awkward State 2. The purpose of the anchor buoy being to mark the position and assist recovery in case of the need to slip the cable and get underway in an emergency. Engines and boilers were kept at 'Immediate notice for steam.' At irregular intervals engines were turned both ahead and astern.'

'Awkward State 2 involved the posting of armed sentries in the bows and at intervals along each side of the ship to the stern, a boat patrol was set up around the ship and divers were on the upper deck ready to enter the water. Sentries were briefed to open fire on any strange swirls in the water and on suspicious objects such as floating boxes, or clumps of vegetation which might conceal the approach of underwater swimmers drifting on the tide which was quite strong.'

'Small arms fire was opened on several occasions during the time at anchor. Being at Defence Stations ensured that all larger calibre weapons could be immediately used to engage surface targets such as small boats. A radar track plot of all craft underway was maintained, and Sonar maintained a listening watch.'²⁷

'I was the Director of Air Warfare (Later Director of Naval Air Policy) and was directly involved in the discussions which led to the decision by the Naval

²⁶ Letter from Commodore John D Goble RAN (Rtd), 1 March 2000.

²⁷ Statement by Commodore John D Goble RAN (Rtd), 29 February 2000.

Board to deploy the helicopters on that first trip (April 1967) and succeeding ones.’

‘The interesting point about the Op Order is that the instructions contained therein accord in the main aspects with the earlier diary extract I sent you, and I daresay are reflected in the correspondence from other skippers who accompanied *Sydney* to Vung Tau.’

‘There is no doubt that there was a capability on the part of the VC to cause damage to ships in the anchorage, and special precautions were taken to counter that threat. Had precautions not been taken, and damage to ships or casualties to personnel occurred, there would have been a tremendous public outcry. For bureaucrats, with the benefit of hindsight, to maintain that because nothing happened there was no threat is a specious argument. Unfortunately, that attitude still seems to prevail in some quarters.’²⁸

Harold Adams: ‘Prior to deploying to Vietnam, *Duchess* had completed an extensive workup off Sydney and was operationally well worked up. *Duchess* sailed from Port Jackson on 16 November (1969) and rendezvoused with HMAS *Sydney* off Brisbane on 18 November. We provided close escort for her through the Barrier Reef, south of the Indonesian archipelago, and into Vung Tau.’

‘On leaving Vung Tau we escorted *Sydney* south for two days when we detached to Singapore on 29 November. The fact that the troop carrier was provided with a close escort was indicative of a level of threat, albeit unknown, which could have disrupted the logistic support of our people in Vietnam. I note that my night orders on leaving Sydney stated that identities were not to be exchanged with passing ships.’

‘Proceeding into Vung Tau both boilers were connected, and from about 50 miles from our anchorage the ship went into defence watches. On approach to the confined waters of Vung Tau harbour special sea-duty men would have been closed-up and the ship assumed State One Condition Zulu and, as I recall, the ship would have been at action stations.’

‘The ship anchored some two cables upstream of HMAS *Sydney* and the anchor was buoyed. The purpose of buoying the anchor was to be able to recover it in the event the anchor cable was slipped in an emergency.’

‘Main engines were at 30 minutes notice throughout our stay, and, on occasions, the engines would have been turned slowly astern to deter saboteur divers.’

²⁸ Letter from Commodore John D Goble RAN (Rtd), 24 October 2000.

‘Ship’s armament reverted to modified defence watches – 40mm guns were manned, as were the bridge mounted 0.5-inch heavy machine guns.’

‘Throughout the time in Vung Tau Operation Awkward was implemented, the main features being:

- Upper deck sentries, each armed with SLR rifles, with authority to fire at any flotsam passing close to the ship which might camouflage a Viet Cong swimmer. (these sailors had been thoroughly trained in these duties before arrival in Vung Tau, many of them were junior sailors (Ords Various) at sea for the first time.) Some 50 rounds were fired off as I recall.
- Ship’s motor cutter on constant patrol of the anchorage, towing a grapnel and carrying several scare charges which were periodically dropped overboard as a deterrent to VC swimmers.
- Ship’s sonar (type 144) was manned throughout.
- Operations room likewise was manned throughout.
- Bridge was manned throughout, and constant communications maintained on tactical, primary and CIC primary with HMAS Sydney which remained the OTC.
- When the tide turned the ship’s divers entered the water to conduct a bottom search.
- Ship was darkened throughout the night.

‘Having regard to the virtual war footing which the ship was on, which was deemed necessary because of the intelligence scenario where merchant ships had been attacked by swimmers, as well as the threat from shore rockets and mortars, it will be appreciated that there was a degree of tension throughout the ship. This, of course, was alleviated by Jolly Jack’s sense of humour and by the confidence building leaderships displayed by the ship’s officers and senior sailors. Never the less, to deny that sailors became stressed, particularly when they had to go below decks for rest and meals, would be to deny that the ship was in a threatened anchorage. Engine Room staff and Damage Control parties would have certainly felt the strain.’

‘It is also relevant that the political fallout from a VC attack on *Sydney* or her escorts would have been huge: at least that was my personal appreciation and to that extent underscored the threat scenario.’

‘For my part, I was always conscious of the responsibility I carried for the safety of the 310 men under my command. Had anything gone wrong it was the

captain who would be court martialled but this one accepts as the price one pays for being privileged to command one of HMA ships.'

'It is of interest to compare the Naval side of Vietnam service with my service with the Royal Navy off Cyprus 1958. As the Squadron Signal Officer and Bridge Watchkeeper on board HMS *Solebay*, our task was to sanitise the approaches to Cyprus to prevent the ingress of arms to the EOKA guerrillas led by General Grivas. Our patrol area extended from Limassol in the south through the western approaches to Kyrenhia in the north, steaming some four to eight miles offshore ready to board any suspicious vessel which could be smuggling arms. A few vessels were boarded without incident during the 28 days on patrol. Apart from one journey from Limassol to Nicosia where the headquarters of the Flag Officer Middle East (Rear Admiral A C C Mires VC RN) was located, our days were spent steaming at 10 to 12 knots in tranquil seas fighting off boredom. For the trip to and from Nicosia the staff car was escorted, and we were issued with side arms.'

'This was qualifying service for the Naval General Service medal provided one did 30 days in the area.'²⁹

Chris Hole: 'We've been at anchor here between Cap St Jacques and the Mekong Delta at the mouth of the Saigon River for 2 days now. Heavens we've covered a lot of territory from leaving Singapore a few weeks ago. Past Borneo and the Sulu Sea, through the Celebes and the Pacific to Manus, where we formed a task group (*Duchess* and *Vendetta*) to escort *Sydney* back across the Pacific, through the San Bernadino Strait in the Philippines & into Subic Bay to fuel. Then straight across the China Sea to Vietnam.'

'We are anchored about half a mile off shore in this hot sticky delta country. At night you can see flares being dropped and the horizon is often lit up by explosions and the odd USN destroyer steams past doing a bombardment. And in the daytime the air is filled with helicopters (ours!). It is so peaceful really, out at anchor, that it is impossible to take in how close to it all we really are.'

'Tomorrow morning early we leave with *Sydney* and *Vendetta* and, once clear of the area, we destroyers leave *Sydney* and head for the fleshpots of Hong Kong.'³⁰

Michael W Hudson: 'On Friday 30 (October 1970), rendezvous was made with HMAS *Sydney* and RFA *Gold Ranger* at 1230 (H) and after carrying out RAS

²⁹ Letter from Commodore Harold J P Adams AM, RAN (Rtd), 8 March 2000.

³⁰ Extract from a letter provided by Mrs Gini Hole, written by her husband to his mother, by the then Lt Chris M G Hole, Navigating Officer, HMAS *Duchess*, 29 September 1965.

(L) and RAS (S) with *Gold Ranger* a light jackstay transfer of personnel and orders was carried out with *Sydney*. On completion *Gold Ranger* was detached to Singapore with *Sydney* and *Vendetta* proceeding to Vung Tau.’

‘The third degree of AA and Surface readiness was assumed at 1800 on the 30th and at 0645 (H) Friday 31st *Vendetta* came to starboard anchor in Bravo 12 berth. *Sydney* anchored shortly afterwards in Bravo 11 berth. Both ships assumed Awkward State Two on anchoring. Unloading of stores commenced immediately from *Sydney*.’

‘Backloading of *Sydney* was completed earlier than planned, but as personnel of the 8th Battalion RAR were not scheduled to embark until the forenoon of the 1st of November, both ships weighed and proceeded at 1600(H), it being considered safer and more comfortable at sea than in the confines of Vung Tau.’

‘At 0730 (H) Sunday, 1st November, both ships returned to Vung Tau and came to single anchor in B11 and B2 berths respectively. The embarkation in HMAS *Sydney* of the 8th Battalion RAR commenced shortly thereafter and was completed by 1130 (H). Both ships weighed and proceeded at 1130 (H) with *Vendetta* leading *Sydney* out of harbour.’

‘The ship was at anchor. It was normal procedure to buoy the cable under these circumstances. The reason for so doing is that if it is necessary to leave in a hurry you can slip the cable and recover it later. This could be as a result of weather or a threat of imminent attack. I am sure the potential risk in Vung Tau was a factor.’

‘Divers were in the water during our visit, albeit not continuously. The ship was at Awkward State Two throughout the time at anchor, as a consequence of the advised threat of underwater swimmer attack. In addition to diver activity, armed lookouts were stationed on the upper deck with instructions to fire at any rubbish or debris which could provide cover for hostile swimmers. When our swimmers were not in the water it was also standard procedure to release scare charges at irregular intervals around the ship as a deterrent to hostile underwater swimmers.’

‘The ship remained at the Third Degree of Readiness, i.e. Defence Stations, throughout the time at anchor. This required a quarter to one third of the Ship’s Company to be closed-up at Defence Stations and ready to respond to surface or AA attack. One twin 4.5-inch gun turret and 1-2 40mm Bofors would be manned with sufficient personnel in the Operations Room and Gunnery Control Position to exercise control of weapons should it be necessary. Radars were

operated throughout. The machinery space and boiler rooms were manned with the ship at very short notice for sea.'

'All the intelligence advice we received clearly indicated a very real threat from underwater swimmers. There was a lesser threat from shore fire and AA attack, but the environment was not one in which the potential risk could be ignored. Preparation for escort duties required both physical and psychological training to ensure that the ship would be materially ready to respond to a range of contingencies and the ship's company, individually and collectively, was mentally prepared to act accordingly. Onboard training emphasised that the ship would be entering a war zone and the safety of a large number of personnel embarked in *Sydney* could depend on our operational effectiveness.'

'I am aware that some of the experts appear to be reinventing history. For two years prior to taking command of *Vendetta* I was Fleet Operations Officer, responsible for establishing the Fleet Training Group (FTG) which conducted operational training for ships deployed to Vietnam and very familiar with the intelligence advice at the time. The assessed threats were very real and no matter what may be said now training was conducted on the basis that once within the operational zone of Vietnam ships and their companies had to be prepared for warlike situations.'³¹

R Malcolm Baird: 'On completion of exercise FEBEX with FO2FEF in HMS *Intrepid*, *Yarra* was part of a fleet entry into Singapore on 19 Feb. (1971). We had been at defence watches for much of the exercise which began on 1 Feb. On Feb. 22 *Yarra* sailed for *Operation Round Barrell* and effected a R/V with *Sydney* late that evening. We replenished from RFA *Olna* early on 23 Feb. and closed-up at defence watches during the middle watch of 24 Feb. as we approached Vung Tau and swept ahead of *Sydney*. We remained at defence watches until we replenished and detached from *Sydney* on 25 Feb. for passage to Hong Kong.'

'We sailed from Vung Tau PM 25 Feb. and swept ahead of *Sydney*. As we cleared the harbour we increased to full speed and went to Action Stations to investigate an unknown grey ship in *Sydney*'s track. We reverted to defence watches after satisfying ourselves that the ship was not a threat.'

'We were anchored about a mile offshore with the anchor buoyed so that I could slip the cable and clear the harbour quickly if necessary. We had advice of enemy swimmer attacks and of enemy practice of floating mines in strings on the tidal stream such that they would snag the cable or the stern and damage the

³¹ Letter from Admiral Michael W Hudson AC, RAN (Rtd) 20 September 1997.

ship. We also knew that enemy swimmers could place mines on the ship's bottom and our propellers, shafts and underwater fittings.'

'We were closed up at Defence Stations and were capable of immediately opening fire with main armament (4.5-inch). Upper deck sentries in position and armed with live ammunition. Their instructions were to be vigilant against swimmers and to open fire if they identified swimmers operating near the ship. We had a well developed operational skill which enabled the safe operation of our own divers. We were never in less than Defence Watches closed-up. This meant that the ship could be brought to action immediately and operations room officers and officer of the watch were authorised by me to take the ship into action if required.'

'There were threats while at anchor, swimmers, speedboats, air and surface attack, any of the unconventional methods which our forces had reported in intelligence. There was also the ever-present risk of the threat from friendly fire as HMAS *Hobart* was to discover. This meant that *Yarra* was kept ready for the unexpected, for the resourceful warrior recognises that it is the unforeseen which could bring him undone.'

'I have the feeling that our service is being regarded as a kind of 'war without danger'. Please assure those who need reassurance that I had left no doubt in the minds of those whom I was privileged to command that they had my complete authority to kill anyone who threatened Australia's efforts. For my part, I was very relaxed at the prospect of having to defend any action of any of my people. We had a task to do; we had rehearsed it, and we were very good at it. Because of this, we were confident that if the enemy came to us, we would win.'³²

'On 25 February 1971, HMAS *Yarra* under my command, was escorting HMAS *Sydney* into and out of Vung Tau harbour to effect a changeover of troops. Before dawn, with the ship at Defence Stations, *Yarra* swept ahead of *Sydney* on entry, provided protection during the day, and swept ahead of *Sydney* on departure. *Yarra* was clear of the harbour when, late in the afternoon, an unidentified ship was detected ahead, and then sighted at about 12 miles. It was painted as a warship. I reported this to *Sydney* together with my intention to investigate the ship. I sent *Yarra* to Action Stations and increased speed to 29 knots.'

The ship was crossing *Sydney's* mean line of advance at about right angles and moving slowly from left to right. My intention was to bring the ship into gun range so that I would maintain a position of gunnery advantage and I would

³² Letter from Commodore R Malcolm Baird AM, RAN (Rtd) 21 February 2000.

keep between *Sydney* and the ship. *Sydney* had plenty of room to move away if necessary. I closed the range to about 7 miles, keeping the target on the starboard bow so that the firing arcs of the 4.5-inch turret were open, and developed a firing solution if I needed it. This meant that the *Seacat* missile mounting was wooded for the approach and I knew that if I wanted to engage with the *Seacat*, I would have to open its firing arcs by turning away when I was within range.'

'Guns tight was ordered. I did not order any weapon system to open fire. *Yarra* did not open fire. I was satisfied that if necessary I could have given adequate protection to *Sydney* and her valuable cargo of troops.'

When the ship came within visual range, we could read its side number and identify it by flashing light and appropriate flag signals. It had not responded to any challenges during *Yarra's* approach. When I was satisfied that it posed not threat, I conveyed this to *Sydney*, fell out from Action Stations and shaped course to rejoin *Sydney*.³³

Peter Sinclair: 'Concerning *Duchess's* two sorties to Vietnam during my time in command --- I still have my night order book for that period, which helps. HMAS *Duchess* closed-up at defence stations at 0330 (H) on 5 April 71, and again at 0345 (H) on 22 May 71 (from the night order book). We were at State 1ZA during the approach to Vung Tau and reverted to Defence Stations throughout our stay there as *Sydney* unloaded. We anchored between *Sydney* and the shoreline. We buoyed the anchor to allow the cable to be broken in an emergency - but we also kept steam on the capstan throughout our stay.'

'We carried out Operation Awkward drills throughout our stay - including dropping grenades and towing obstructions. Defence watches - with one turret fully manned and with live ammunition in the gun bay racks. In fact, during our first visit VC activity was reported nearing mortar range of the anchorage, in the foot hills surrounding Vung Tau. *Duchess* had only recently won the Otranto Shield for gunnery and we were a very efficient NGFS ship with our MRS3 and six 4.5-inch gun system. We went to action stations and I recall sending signals that we were ready and able to engage if requested. Instead we were ordered to leave Vung Tau with *Sydney* and night steam in offshore waters before returning to complete offloading the next morning. I recall being very frustrated that we were not able to show our teeth, then and during the subsequent passage up the coast of Vietnam on our way to Hong Kong - and I

³³ Statement by Commodore R Malcolm Baird AM, RAN (Rtd), 24 July 2004, Donnelly and Repatriation Commission (2005) AATA 612 (29 June 2005).

know the ship's company shared my feelings - because we were a very good gunnery ship.'³⁴

'Your letter of 11 October is at hand and I can confirm that the Standing Orders are familiar to me. They were issued to all escorts that operated in Vietnam waters with Sydney. CTG 327 (who was the Commanding Officer HMAS *Sydney*) would issue supplementary orders to the overall Standing Orders as necessary and each Commanding Officer would also put in place additional measures within his ship, as he believed appropriate.'³⁵

Ian B James: 'On all escort trips the Commanding Officer, HMAS Sydney was Senior Officer and Officer in Tactical Command (OTC) responsible for local threat assessments pursuant to intelligence reports received, and for the issue of Operation Orders. The conduct of ships on passage and whilst in Vietnamese waters, including when at Vung Tau, would have been in accordance with, and guided by, these Operation Orders. During Trips 1 and 2 (October/December 1971) whilst in Vung Tau, *Swan* would have patrolled in the areas designated by the OTC. An important part of patrolling would have been a sharp lookout for and investigation of any suspicious activity, on or just below the surface, including small boats and any floating and partially submerged objects.'

'At the time of each of my three trips to Vietnam in ships escorting HMAS *Sydney*, there was no doubt in my mind, nor in the mind of any member of the Ship's Company, that the ship was entering an operational area, and the ships and everyone onboard conducted themselves accordingly. Whilst the tempo of operations was not the same as that experienced, at times, by ships attached to the US Seventh Fleet (I was Executive Officer of HMAS Hobart during her first and second deployments to Vietnam), in HMA Ships *Swan* and *Duchess* we always considered that a real threat existed with an associated risk to the ship and personnel.'³⁶

Ian W Knox: 'I have a copy of my ROP for that period and my memory has been jogged somewhat. To give an overview: At 1500 on 24 Feb 1972 HMAS *Torrens* detached from *Exercise Sea Hawk* and chopped from FOCAF operational control of ACNB for escort duties with *Sydney*. *Torrens* rendezvoused with Sydney at 0800 on 27/2 and remained in company until 0400 on 29/2 when the ship was detached to proceed into Vung Tau ahead of Sydney to sweep ahead and to check that her berth was clear before anchoring. At the same time Defence Watches were closed-up. *Torrens* anchored at 0650, and

³⁴ Letter from Rear Admiral Peter Sinclair AC, RAN (Rtd), 11 February 2000.

³⁵ Letter from Rear Admiral Peter Sinclair AC, RAN (Rtd), 15 October 2000.

³⁶ Letter from Commodore Ian B James AM, RAN (Rtd), 8 March 2000.

Sydney anchored at 0700, in berths A12 and B12 respectively. Full Operation Awkward organisation was assumed on anchoring.’

‘*Torrens* proceeded to sea ahead of *Sydney* at 1930 and both ships steamed in company overnight with *Torrens* carrying out normal escort duties. At 0600 on 29/2 *Torrens* was detached to proceed ahead of *Sydney*, carrying out visual and sonar sweeps through the assigned anchor berths. *Torrens* anchored at 0835 and assumed full Operation Awkward organisation. On completion of *Sydney*’s loading *Torrens* proceeded to sea at 1840 ahead of *Sydney*. *Torrens* screened *Sydney* until 2230 when *Torrens* was detached and reverted to the operational control of FOCAF.’

‘*Torrens* was closed up at defence watches or higher states of readiness from the time of joining *Sydney* until we detached.’

‘Awkward involved State1 Condition Zulu and the ship was closed up at that state while at anchor. There was a very real threat of underwater attack from swimmers. Such attacks had been mounted previously. Because of the very real threat of underwater sabotage, and the possibility of attack from high speed small surface craft, both of which are more difficult to counter under cover of darkness, both ships proceeded to sea overnight.’

‘The ship was at anchor and I don’t know for sure if the anchor was buoyed. Awkward certainly involved a constant watch on the anchor cable. The ship’s divers were not in the water. Awkward involves dropping explosive charges over the ship’s side and from boats patrolling around the ship to prevent, or deter, swimmer attack. Only in the event of a suspected attack are divers put in the water to search for explosives attached to the ship. At no time did we suspect an attack.’³⁷

Draft Forewords and Other Comments

David W Leach: ‘This is a book that had to be written, stemming from a Doctoral thesis by Dr John Carroll.’

‘The author has, with careful and painstaking research, recorded the invaluable logistic support by the RAN to the Australian Defence Forces in the Vietnam conflict over forty years ago - a story largely untold.’

‘He investigates the 25 voyages of HMAS *Sydney* and the destroyer escorts to the war zone, together with the two ships *Jeparit* and *Boonaroo*, taken up from trade, because of union problems in manning them.’

³⁷ Letter from Vice Admiral Ian W Knox AC, RAN (Rtd), 12 February 2000.

‘In his excellent introduction, Dr Carroll sets the record straight on a number of matters.’

‘It is an important work and a book of reference that shows the invaluable contribution of the RAN’s logistical support during the Vietnam War.’³⁸

R Malcolm Baird: ‘Any analysis of actions in a war zone must remain incomplete, for it is the nature of war to be so all consuming that much detail is swamped by events which shape the result of the action. John Carroll has painted an accurate picture of almost seven years in which Australian naval support to the Australian Army was crucial to the success of Australia’s commitment to the war in Vietnam. His description of logistical and transportation needs as being ‘unglamorous’ is beyond question. That those needs were met reliably and safely by a navy which was already at full stretch is amply illustrated in the pages of his thesis.’

‘In a sense it was ever thus that key functions are overlooked in the scheme of things. Whether it be the 15th century proverb - ‘For the want of a nail the shoe was lost; for the want of a shoe the horse was lost; and for the want of a horse the man was lost’ or Admiral Ronald A Hopwood’s ‘Laws of the Navy’ which points out ‘None seeth the work of the piston, but it driveth the ship nonetheless’; the significance of small but vital matters tend to be overlooked. At a conference of Ministers on April 20th, 1943, Winston Churchill observed ‘Much, if not most of the Navy’s work goes unseen.’

‘So, it is good that this work has come forward at a time when Australia is spending much treasure on logistic support elements in our Defence Force. Former Prime Minister Howard writes with some passion in his autobiography after his experience in the provision of support for the international force in 1999 in East Timor. He points to the ‘*Incat* vessel constructed for civilian ferry purposes’, which was commissioned as HMAS Jervis Bay, and writes that it had worked brilliantly. He goes on ‘My concern on this never left me and was, some years later, directly responsible for my persuading Cabinet to invest some \$4 billion in the purchase of the giant C17 transport aircraft, as well as acquiring large amphibious lift vessels.’

‘The careful research in this work reveals that each of the twenty-five voyages of HMAS Sydney was a splendid example of teamwork, and each was a successful operation in its own right. The political and military mechanisms by which ships were made available, the obstacles overcome by taking into service civilian ships and providing them with trained crews, the protection of the

³⁸ Letter from Vice Admiral David W Leach AC, CBE, LVO, RAN (Rtd), 21 November 2011.

troops in transit, and the sensitive matters of Rules of Engagement come to life as the archives have yielded to Carroll's work. Even the somewhat dry Reports of Proceedings gain a measure of literary worth, as various Captains sought to convey the month's activities. The dry tone of the R.O.P disguises the ever-present danger. Carroll removes much of that disguise.'

'That this effort was provided by a navy which from any perspective was over committed was remarkable. As an example, HMAS *Sydney*, launched in 1944, and commissioned in 1948 was already an old ship when she was converted into a troop transport in 1962. Many of the 'internals' i.e. generators, fans, boilers, auxiliary machinery, was of pre-world war two design, and was manpower intensive. During this period there was annually a major SEATO exercise in which the RAN's aircraft carrier group was a central feature. Two destroyers were kept in the Far East Strategic Reserve, and one destroyer was kept deployed with the US forces in Vietnam. These ships had an operational availability of about 60%, so the maintenance needs kept pressure on the naval dockyards. It was a busy time, and Carroll's work makes clear the burden which these commitments placed on naval people, *Sydney* operated within this framework.'

'That there was danger is incontrovertible. Governments of all persuasions do not send forces into active service lightly or wantonly, and ships' companies do not take kindly to undertakings they regard as trivial. The ships and their men were under considerable pressure and were ready for action. That none was seen does not imply that the enemy was absent, rather that the preparations of Australia's people was adequate.'

'This work contributes significantly to Australia's military history. Churchill's 1943 observation gives poignancy to its title.'³⁹

Andrew J Robertson: 'I have at last been able to read your splendid thesis and make the following comments.'

'Your dedication to the task and the great compass of your most detailed examination of so many sources to provide such a fine thesis, I find quite unbelievable.'

'You have produced a document which will be of some naval and defence historical importance, drawing together as it does so many strands which paint an accurate picture of the RAN's logistical support role in the Vietnam War. One of the most important sinews which make victory possible in war is a

³⁹ Letter from Commodore R Malcolm Baird AM, RAN (Rtd), 27 October 2011.

thoroughly efficient and reliable logistical organisation, unsung and unglamorous as it may be.’

‘In my view, your thesis not only provides a valuable historical record, but segments throw much light on what can be involved for the logistical support of any future ADF distant deployment. As such it should be of interest to Staff Colleges.’⁴⁰

R Geoffrey Loosli: ‘There is no glory or glamour in logistics, but without an effective and efficient support and supply system, fighting forces would be unable to sustain their operations. Just as Australia relies on sea transport for 95 percent of its trade, so it is that the Australian Army Task Force in Vietnam came to rely on a motley collection of vessels for the transportation of 95 percent of its supplies, and its ever-increasing needs in personnel and equipment over the seven long years of the war.’

‘HMAS *Sydney* was no longer capable of operating fixed wing aircraft, but with minimal structural alterations, proved to be a capable vessel for the logistical task. *Jeparit* and *Boonaroo* were merchant ships manned by a mixture of Navy and Merchant seamen. Between these three ships – along with the occasional Army water craft – they formed the sea transport and logistic support force, which kept the Australian Task Force in Vietnam supplied with the vast bulk of its men and *materiel* needs.’

‘The very mention of logistics can be met with a lack of enthusiasm by operational staff officers, as they can get too involved with operations then underway. It was expected that the ‘system’ would load and offload - on time, and in the right place - all the vehicles, stores and equipment needed and personnel joining or departing the Task Force, without fanfare or fuss.’

‘In the case of Australian Forces involved in Vietnam, the lack of appreciation of logistical support was amply illustrated by the need to define the conditions required to be met by individual servicemen in order to qualify for Repatriation Benefits in the years ahead. The first anomaly was the decision that a soldier going to Vietnam would qualify from the day he departed Australia in *Sydney* for the voyage to Vung Tau - but the ship’s crew would not qualify. Then it was decided that serviceman could qualify if he spent one day in Vietnam, but only if he had been ‘allotted’. RAN logistic support personnel would not be allotted, because it was deemed that they did not actively face the enemy, and therefore there was no danger of being attacked.’

⁴⁰ Letter from Rear Admiral Andrew J Robertson AO, DSC, RAN (Rtd), 21 November 2011.

‘Next there was the need to define ‘Operational Service’, and to decide whether or not naval personnel would qualify for the Returned from Active Service Badge (RAS(B), as well as who would receive the Vietnam Medal. Somehow, it was reasoned that naval logistic support personnel would qualify for the RAS (B) but not the Vietnam Medal. A separate medal would be struck - the Vietnam Logistic and Support Medal.’

‘When *Sydney* undertook her first voyage, naval intelligence staff assessed the threat which could face the ship with its precious cargo. It was determined that escort ships must accompany her for protection for at least the last 4-500 miles of the voyage and into the anchorage of Vung Tau, anchoring nearby at a State of Readiness which would deter any action by air, water or land based enemy forces. The tactical measures are fully described by Carroll, as are the intelligence reports defining the possible threat, which did not change throughout the conflict.’

‘In meticulously researching the operation of the sea transport-logistical support ships, Dr Carroll has corresponded with nearly all the surviving Commanding Officers of *Sydney*, and most, if not all of the Commanding Officers of the Escorts. He has examined all the Logs and Reports of Proceedings of all the ships, and many Australian, US and friendly foreign publications. His thesis tells the story of the 25 voyages *Sydney* made in support of the Australian Task Force Vietnam, the potential dangers faced on each occasion, and how the Navy ensured that the ships would be prepared to meet any attempted attacks. It is a story that needs to be told and recorded. It is also a story that reflects an unfortunate attitude of Government towards Defence force personnel, especially during the post war years.’

By 1975, *Sydney* had been scrapped. Her role as a logistical support ship was eventually replaced by two 25-year-old US Navy LST's - renamed *Kanimbla* and *Manoora* - purchased in 1994, and operated by the RAN for 16 years, when they to were scrapped. In 2011, two new amphibious Landing Helicopter Dock (LPD) ships are now under construction as replacements. It would seem that the lessons of logistics in support of the Task Force in Vietnam have at last been well absorbed by those in the Department of Defence, and by those who hold the purse-strings in government.⁴¹

Ends.

Dr John Carroll.

18th February 2018.

⁴¹ Letter from Rear Admiral R Geoffrey Loosli CBE, RAN (Rtd), 15 November 2011.