

the landing, and holding of the beachheads, more likely. He notes the massive level of force and firepower, which was necessary to begin, establish and sustain the landings.

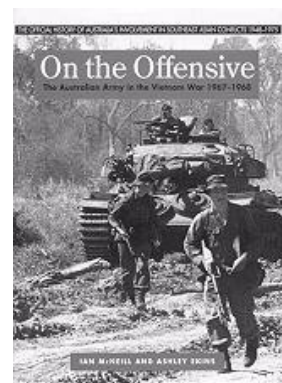
The account of the development of the Overlord gives us vital lesson of the difficulty and risk involved in opposed amphibious landings. These are lessons that ought not to be ignored as the ADF moves to develop a greater maritime operational capacity.

The disaster of the Dieppe Raid, a 'reconnaissance in force' in August 1942, was an object lesson on how an inadequately prepared invading force would be destroyed. Some 252 ships carried 6100 troops and 30 tanks across the channel to attack and hold the port of Dieppe. The engagement was a disaster. In a single day 4100 were killed, wounded, missing or captured compared to German losses of 314 killed, 294 wounded and 37 captured. The allies lost all the tanks, one destroyer, three landing craft and 99 aircraft compared to the German loss of 48 aircraft. This brutal lesson tempered the thinking of Lieutenant General Morgan, who took four months to prepare the first draft of Overlord. This plan was refined and fleshed out from July 1943 to its execution on D-Day in 1944. The essentials remained the same. A massive assault in Normandy followed by the rapid capture of major ports to facilitate the huge supply train needed to support the allied forces liberating France and advancing into Germany.

The apparent simplicity of Overlord was, as Van Der Vat, notes contrasted by the final details. Even though Admiral Ramsay, who carried out the Dunkirk operation, was put in charge of the naval planning, his demands for more and more shipping delayed D-Day. The naval operational orders eventually took up a thousand pages, detailing the deployment and operations of 1212 warships, over 4000 landing craft, and over 1500 ancillary support ships. The planning involved a curious range of lateral thinking activities. Concrete caissons some 255 foot long and weighing 6000 tonnes, called 'Mulberries' and scuttled block ships, called 'Gooseberries' were used to create artificial harbours. The Pipe Line Under The Ocean, or PLUTO, provided the tens of thousands of gallons of fuel consumed each day and removed the need for vulnerable tankers. Van Der Vat covers the important airborne landings, and refutes the nonsense, left in the minds of many people, by various films on D-Day. He shows that while there was occasional confusion, the operational control and application of the airborne forces was particularly effective in securing their objectives. The naval and air force attacks show that support of the landing was an especially complex operation, which demanded the very best of the skills of the crews and their commanders.

About a quarter of the text is devoted to the actual day of the landing, and this is a heart-stopping section of the narrative. It is a must read. The course of the invasion is followed to the breakout stage and the author ends his account with the Canadian Army liberating his home town in Holland. He notes that—'For my family and me, and for millions of Western Europeans, it was freedom — the gift of life itself.' ♦

Dan Van Der Vat, *'D-Day: The Greatest Invasion - A People's History'*, Allen&Unwin, Sydney, 2003, casebound and jacketed, 176pp, \$49.95.



On the offensive: The Australian Army in the Vietnam War January 1967–June 1968

Ian McNeill and Ashley Ekins

Reviewed by John Essex-Clark

This clearly written and impressive book, the eighth volume in the *Official History of Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948–1975*, follows on from *To Long Tan*, the account of the Army's involvement in Vietnam from 1950 to 1966.

This volume is well presented with quality paper, good maps and a balance of good colour and black and white photographs. Its writing has involved vast research by the authors and their teams. Unfortunately Ian McNeill, one of the two authors and a Vietnam veteran himself, died during the book's production. This obviously caused a heavy burden on the other, Ashley Ekins, especially as he did not have the advantage of McNeill's comprehensive and intimate knowledge of the personalities and operations involved, or of the ethos of the Army of that era.

As in any history based on coupling the memories of men with written records it contains areas of contention. It is, however, a masterpiece of writing about a war that had so many critics and numerous political twists and turns. The book describes well a war that appeared to have no easily identifiable strategic objective in Australia's national interest and whose rationale and prosecution was subject to much vilification in Australia. This account helps to clarify the quandary faced by politicians attempting to balance their perceptions of strategic interest against political reality, and also the military operational needs of the campaign concerned against the economic and political costs.

The volume accurately describes the differences between US and Australian methods of fighting the war and their differing political objectives; for example was the overall mission to defeat the communist forces or restore democracy and South Vietnamese government control? It also explains the dichotomy between those two missions and the cultural canyon between East and West. Rudyard Kipling was right when he said 'never the twain shall meet'. The discussions with former Viet Cong opponents and research into communist Vietnamese histories add much

to knowledge of how the war was fought by both sides.

The influence of Australia's participation in Vietnam on social and political activities 'back home' where our involvement created much harsh debate, politically and socially, is shown. The authors cover the effect of the war on Australia's domestic scene, and the influence that it had on the Australians fighting in Vietnam. Perhaps the neat transfer of the consequences of the war onto the shoulders of the military, rather than to the politicians who sent our forces there, could have been described more forcefully.

Central to the book is the theme of the development of the 1st Australian Task Force based in, and operating primarily throughout, Phuoc Tuy Province with occasional forays elsewhere. During the period covered the task force had three different commanders with each having a different method of achieving the objectives set for 1 ATF. The term 'task force' was a legacy from the then recently and happily discarded 'Pentropic' organisation, but often confused US and other allied forces. What we had in Vietnam was, in fact, a 'brigade group' and the term 'task force' too often diminished impressions of the scale of our effort—even though we were very small when related to the total allied forces 'in Theatre'.

The ill-fated minefield south of Nui Dat and the post-Tet 1968 battles at Coral and Balmoral are covered comprehensively. The political pressure that plagued Army Headquarters to adopt the cheaper 'individual replacement system' instead of the tried and tested 'unit replacement' are too lightly covered. Fortunately, the unit system prevailed and our example has been subsequently adopted by the US Army since Vietnam.

The title *On the Offensive* is possibly somewhat offensive to some because it intimates that previous operations such as Crimp, Rolling Stone, Bribe, Long Tan and many other tough operations may not be considered 'officially' as offensive operations. This said; all worthwhile operational and logistic activities concerning Australia in Vietnam during the period are well covered. The book also deals with the success of our national servicemen as soldiers. Our diggers, whether national servicemen or regulars, come out magnificently and again display the traditional high value military characteristics that one expects from them. The authors show that they match the quality and attitude described in many other accounts over the last century and make us all, once again, proud of them and our nation.

In a wide-ranging volume such as this it is also difficult to give due attention to the myriad activities undertaken by the Australian Army Training Team—Vietnam (AATTV) and the SASR. While the separate semi-official histories of AATTV and SASR, written by Ian McNeill and David Horner respectively, do cover this aspect very well there should perhaps have also been an official history.

Some mild criticism had been directed at the long time it took to finish and publish this volume. Considering that Ekins had to take over McNeil's research papers and delve back into that research it seems understandable

that this entailed some delay. Unfortunately the time taken has allowed other books to be produced about major events of the period, such as Lex McAulay's excellent *The Battle for Coral*, and this has stolen some of the 'thunder' and uniqueness that is due to *On the Offensive*.

Since publication there has also been criticism about the portrayal of some incidents, most notably the controversial episode of 106 Field Battery, 4th Field Regiment, Royal Australian Artillery at Fire Support Base Bravo. Many feel that Ekins was, perhaps, not critical enough in his historical portrayal of the event, which is largely confined to what was recorded at the Court Martial involved. Unfortunately the challenges to Ekins' account have only highlighted the poor discipline at that Fire Support Base during that period. Complaining about the truth cannot bring back to life Lieutenant Robert Birse, nor ameliorate the tragic circumstances that led to his death.

In the media, and in the official magazine of the Australian War memorial, *Wartime*, Ekins has subsequently responded convincingly to criticism of his account; as has the memorial's director, Major General Steve Gower (an artillery officer in Vietnam). Gower wrote: 'An official historian's role is to record his views free of political or institutional interference. It is difficult to comprehend how the incident at the Fire Support Base could be ignored, irrespective of the battery's performance, which is well covered in the volume, before and after.' Gower added, 'there was undeniable evidence of uncontrolled drinking on the operation before the officer died. This, by any standard, is totally unacceptable—alcohol and artillery fire support don't mix'. Gower's comments would be applauded by all professional soldiers and are applicable for any type of combat operation.

Finally, it is a pity that the Australian 'End of War' awards, gazetted in May 1998, were not added to the list of awards in Appendix D to the volume. None know the reason why these awards were so late and how they were adjusted to match the nearest contemporary Australian equivalents. Ashley Ekins has advised these will be included in his final volume on the war, *Combat Operations*, that is near to completion.

Ashley Ekins and his team have done a daunting and complex task well. Also daunting is the price of the book but unfortunately that is the cost of producing a book of this quality and magnitude these days. This volume is, however, a comprehensive and valuable portrayal of an important episode in Australian history that is worth far more than the price. The descriptions are forthright, and the writing is clear and concise. This is a book for both warriors and students of military history. ♦

Ian McNeill and Ashley Ekins, 'On the Offensive: The Australian Army in the Vietnam War, January 1967–June 1968', Allen&Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, Sydney, 2003, casebound and jacketed, 650pp, RRP \$80.00.