

Fact Sheet 1: Introduction- the Vietnam War

Between June 1964 and December 1972 around 3500 New Zealand service personnel served in South Vietnam. Unlike the First and Second World Wars New Zealand's contribution in terms of personnel was not huge. At its peak in 1968 the New Zealand force only numbered 543. Thirty-seven died while on active service and 187 were wounded.

The **Vietnam War** – sometimes referred to as the **Second Indochina War** – lasted from 1959 to 1975. In Vietnam it is referred to as the **American War**. It was fought between the communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) and its allies, and the US-supported Republic of Vietnam in the south. It ended with the defeat of South Vietnam in April 1975. Nearly 1.5 million military personnel were killed in the war, and it is estimated that up to 2 million civilians also died.

This was the first war in which New Zealand did not fight with its traditional ally, Great Britain. Our participation reflected this country's increasingly strong defence ties with the United States and Australia. New Zealand's involvement in Vietnam was highly controversial and attracted protest and condemnation at home and abroad.

A study of New Zealand's involvement in the Vietnam War raises a number of issues. As a historical study we want to find out what happened, why it happened and how it affected people's lives. This war meant different things to different people. The Vietnam War was, and still is, an important part of the lives of many New Zealanders. It is central to some people's sense of personal identity.

An outline has been included to show how this topic relates to the objectives of the New Zealand curriculum. It is over 30 years since the Vietnam War ended so some readers might appreciate some background information to better understand the conflict and New Zealand's role in it. While who, what, where, why and how are obvious starting places, a series of fact sheets have been provided to help you to determine the most appropriate angle for your own class.

After the war Vietnam and New Zealand slowly re-established diplomatic relations. In 1995 the New Zealand embassy was opened in Hanoi and its Consulate was opened in Ho Chi Minh City. Vietnam's embassy was opened in New Zealand in May 2003.

There have been numerous visits from political leaders from both countries to establish bilateral cooperation between the two countries in a number of areas. In May 2005 during an official visit to New Zealand the Vietnamese Prime Minister, Phan Van Khai, and New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark signed a 'Declaration on cooperation between Vietnam and New Zealand'. Both countries confirmed their determination to cooperate in the future to 'establish a comprehensive, long - standing and stable partnership'.

Fact sheet 2: Vietnam – the place and the people

Vietnam is the easternmost country on the Indochina peninsula in Southeast Asia. Vietnam can be described as an 'S'-shaped country, bordered by China to the north, Laos to the northwest, Cambodia to the southwest, and the South China Sea to the east. In 2007 it had a population of over 87 million, which made it the 13th most populous country in the world.

A long, narrow coastal plain links the Red River delta in the north and Mekong River delta in the south. The country is 1650 kilometres from north to south (similar to the length of New Zealand) although Vietnam's total land area is larger than New Zealand's. The Annamite Mountains (ãy Trường Sơn) stretch the length of Vietnam and cover about two-thirds of the country. The highest peak is Fan-si-Pan (3143 metres) in the extreme north.

Climate

The climate of Vietnam can be divided into three distinct zones: the southern lowlands have a tropical climate, the central highlands are wet with a temperate climate, and the mountainous north is cooler. Typhoons can affect the north and central areas between July and November.

People

Most of Vietnam's people live in the Red River and Mekong River deltas. Only about 22% of the population lives in urban areas. Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) is the largest settlement with a population of 4 million, followed by Hanoi, the capital city, with 3 million, and Haiphong with 1.5 million.

Around 80% of the population are ethnic Vietnamese. There are also around 53 ethnic minority groups, the largest being Chinese, Thai, Khmer and Cham people.

Most Vietnamese are Buddhist. Due to strong Chinese influence Confucianism and Taoism are also followed. Christianity, predominantly Roman Catholicism, was established in Vietnam due largely to France's colonisation of the area during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Southeast Asia

Vietnam is part of a sub-region of Asia, consisting of the countries that are geographically south of China, east of India and north of Australia. It consists of two geographic regions:

- the Asian mainland: Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam
- the island states: Brunei, Timor-Leste, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore.

Since the end of the Second World War this region has become increasingly important to New Zealand. During the 1950s and 1960s New Zealand was involved in armed conflicts in both Malaysia and Indonesia. In more recent times New Zealand service personnel have played a role in Timor-Leste (East Timor) as United Nations peacekeepers.

Southeast Asia has become an important region as far as New Zealand's international trade is concerned. Increasing numbers of people from this region have also migrated to New Zealand.

Activities

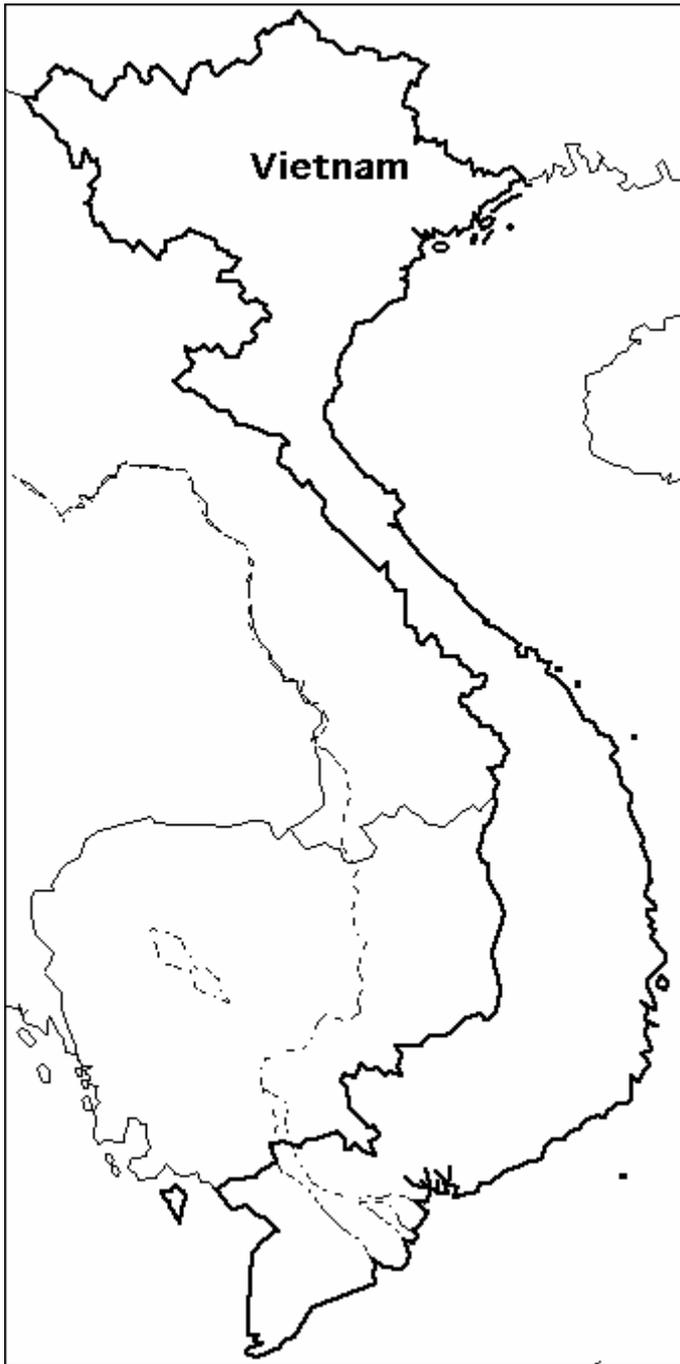
1. There is a map available from Vietnamwar.govt.nz but sometimes it helps to let students explore maps and locations for themselves. Use the blank map outline provided to **identify and label** Vietnam's neighbours as well as the following features (if you don't have access to atlases there are many good online maps/atlas you could refer to):

- Hanoi
- Ho Chi Minh City
- Haiphong
- Mekong River and its delta
- Red River and its delta
- Red River
- Nui Dat
- 17th parallel (younger students might need to have the term parallel explained to them)
- Hue
- Da Nang

2. Use the maps and these facts about the region to discuss what relevance Vietnam has to New Zealand.

3. While there are many differences between Vietnam and New Zealand there are also a number of similarities. Use the information from this fact sheet and any other sources you can find to draw up a chart that compares Vietnam and New Zealand.

Useful online resources for country information and statistics include [Global Education](#) and the [Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade](#)



Fact Sheet 3: the history of Vietnam up to the end of the Second World War

The first Vietnamese state developed around the Red River Delta (in the north) around 207 BC. In 111 BC it was conquered by China and ruled by the Chinese until 938 AD. During this time the Vietnamese rebelled and tried to win back their independence. In 967 AD the first Vietnamese Emperor began his rule. Eventually all of the territory of modern Vietnam was included in this empire. Buddhism flourished and became the state religion.

In the 16th century Europeans made their first contact with Vietnam. During the 19th century the French in particular sought to influence the Vietnamese people. Portuguese and French Catholic missionaries tried to convert many Vietnamese to Christianity. The French gradually increased their influence and by 1890 controlled the entire region known as Indochina.

The French wanted to exploit the natural resources of Indochina while at the same time providing a market for goods made in France. Vietnamese peasants were put to work in factories, zinc mines and copper plantations. Many lost control of what little land they had and thousands died from malnutrition, malaria and dysentery. The Vietnamese staged revolts against the French but were unable to win back their independence.

France ruled Vietnam until it was defeated by Nazi Germany in 1940. Japanese troops then entered Indochina. The Japanese initially allowed the local French authorities to continue governing the region. In March 1945 the Japanese ousted the French government in Indochina. The Vietnamese Emperor Bao Dai was allowed to rule in part of the country but the Japanese retained control.

In 1941 the Viet Minh (Vietnamese Independence League) was formed. Led by Ho Chi Minh, this was a nationalist organisation that was dominated by communists. The Viet Minh developed their own army and aimed to remove all foreign control from Vietnam. When Japan surrendered to the allies in August 1945 the Viet Minh launched the August Revolution. Emperor Bao Dai abdicated and Ho Chi Minh announced the creation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) on 2 September 1945.

The DRV was short-lived. The major powers – the USA, Soviet Union, Britain and China – had other plans. They had agreed – without consulting the people of Vietnam – that when Japan was defeated Vietnam would be divided. The north would be occupied by Chinese nationalist (non-communist) forces and the south by the British. Britain had decided that they would clear the way for the French to return to their former colony. As the British wanted to resume control of their own imperial possessions like Hong Kong, Malaya and Singapore they could hardly have done otherwise.

Fact Sheet 4: The First Indochina War and its outcomes

The Viet Minh and others favouring Vietnamese independence opposed the return of the French. In December 1946 a full scale war broke out between the Viet Minh and French authorities. France reacted by creating a semi-independent State of Vietnam as part of the fourth French Republic. It appointed Bao Dai as the Head of State.

When the Chinese communists won the civil war in China in 1949 they began to send the Viet Minh military aid. This concerned the United States which was worried about the spread of communism in Asia. These were the early years of what was described as the Cold War. The Cold War was the name given to the rivalry that developed after the Second World War between the US and its allies and communist powers such as the Soviet Union, China and their allies. During the Cold War the superpowers did not fight each other directly (as in a 'hot war') but instead fought indirectly, often by taking sides in other conflicts such as those in Korea in 1950-53 and later Vietnam.

The Viet Minh had grown stronger with China's help and was able to defeat the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. This marked the end of French power in Vietnam. Just before the French defeat, the US President Dwight Eisenhower used the term **Domino Theory** to describe growing concern over communist influence in Indochina. This theory was quite clear: if the communists were not stopped, then Burma, Thailand and Indonesia would be next. Like falling dominoes the communists would then be able to target Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, and even Australia and New Zealand.

Not everybody agreed with this Domino Theory. Some argued that the US used it to justify interfering in the affairs of other countries when it opposed the changes taking place.

A conference was held in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1954 to resolve matters in Indochina. As a result Vietnam was temporarily divided into two states at the 17th parallel. (See map)

- South of the 17th parallel would be a fully independent non-communist State of Vietnam.
- North of the 17th parallel the Viet Minh would be in control
- Elections would be held in 1956 to decide who would lead a unified Vietnam.

Two million North Vietnamese civilians emigrated to South Vietnam as a result of the partition. Viet Minh soldiers were required to leave South Vietnam. While many of the Viet Minh in this part of Vietnam were southerners some Viet Minh officers from the north secretly remained in the South.

Fact Sheet 5: The Second Indochina War 1960-1975

After the partition of Vietnam in 1954 South Vietnam was led by Bao Dai with Ngo Dinh Diem as his Premier.

- Diem was a nationalist who hated the communists
- he was also a Catholic, a religion strongly associated with the French
- he had strong links with the United States:
 - the US gave Diem military and economic aid
 - they saw him as a strong anti-communist leader who would resist the spread of communism in the region.
- he was not interested in playing second fiddle to Bao Dai
 - in 1955 he used a referendum to remove Bao Dai from power
 - Diem now declared himself President of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN or South Vietnam)

The 1954 Geneva Accord had promised elections to determine the government for a unified Vietnam. France and the Viet Minh signed this agreement but Diem and the US did not. Fearing that Ho Chi Minh would win the election due to his war and nationalist popularity Diem refused to allow the election in South Vietnam.

Diem set about attacking all possible threats to his government. These actions alienated many South Vietnamese, both communist and non-communist. Many of his measures challenged traditional Vietnamese beliefs. He promoted family members to high positions and his most trusted official was his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu. Many of his officials abused their power and tried to promote Catholicism over other religions. This led to protests from the Buddhist community. His critics believed the only thing keeping him in power was the support he received from the US.

The regime in the north was also repressive. Thousands of people opposed to the communist government were executed.

A second war broke out in Vietnam. This began as a civil war. Viet Minh still living in South Vietnam began a low-level insurgency in late 1956. The scale of the fighting increased from 1960 when the Viet Minh organised and controlled a rural uprising in the South. Most of Diem's support came from the cities whereas the majority of the population was poor farmers. Many of these people had struggled under Diem's government and were willing to fight against it.

This insurgency was led by the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF), which was formed at the end of 1960 and provided an alternative government to Diem's regime. The NLF was made up of two distinct groups – nationalists and communists – although the latter dominated the movement. The NLF wanted to seize political power through a popular revolution and unify Vietnam. It also sought an end American influence.

The NLF's military forces became known as the Viet Cong (which meant 'Vietnamese Communists') and received weapons, supplies and troops from North Vietnam. This support came via a system of jungle trails named the Ho Chi Minh Trail. These trails ran into neighbouring Laos and Cambodia before entering South Vietnam. North Vietnam initially received most of its aid from China. The Soviet Union later provided North Vietnam with tanks, artillery, MIG fighter planes and surface-to-air missiles.

In the early 1960s the US increased its assistance to South Vietnam. New Zealand resisted American pressure to make a contribution as well. The New Zealand government doubted whether any outside help would be effective and was worried about a wider war developing that might include China.

The fall of Diem

There had been attempts to overthrow Diem in 1960 and 1962. Both times he had remained in power but his position became more difficult in 1963. An incident on 11 June dealt his government a serious blow. A Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc, burned himself to death at a busy intersection in Saigon. He was protesting about the persecution of Buddhists by Diem. His death was captured on film and flashed around the world. Diem's communist rivals claimed Thich Quang Duc's death was a protest over the war. They used this as further evidence that Diem had no support from the Vietnamese people. The US was now worried that Diem's regime was undermining their anti-communist effort in Southeast Asia. In November 1963 an army coup overthrew Diem. On 2 November Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu were captured and executed in the back of an armoured personnel carrier. Those leading the coup believed they had the support of the US government.

Diem's murder did not bring about greater stability in Vietnam. For the next few years the generals fought with each other and promoted their own men to positions of authority. No government could keep power for long. Eventually in 1965 General Nguyen Van Thieu established some stability in South Vietnam.

Instability in the south helped the Viet Cong. In 1965 US President Johnson decided to act. He did not see the conflict as a civil war, and feared that without US intervention other Southeast Asian countries would fall to communism. America decided to send troops to South Vietnam and its air force began bombing the North.

Fact sheet 6: New Zealand and the Vietnam War

- *Why did New Zealand fight in Vietnam?*

When the Second World War broke out in 1939 New Zealand declared in reference to Britain, 'Where she goes, we go; where she stands, we stand'. Until the Second World War Britain was our most significant ally but that conflict changed everything. Britain had been unable to halt Japan's expansion in Asia during the war. New Zealand and Australia felt vulnerable. After the war New Zealand and Australia turned to the United States for added protection.

In 1951 Australia, New Zealand and the US signed the ANZUS treaty. The US was keen to secure allies in its fight against the spread of communism. In 1954 New Zealand joined the US and Australia in signing the South-East Asia Collective Defence Treaty, or Manila Pact, another anti-communist alliance. Other signatories included France, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand and the United Kingdom.

But these treaties did not force New Zealand to become involved in Vietnam. France and Britain, for example, did not participate in the war. The main reason for New Zealand's involvement was the need to be seen to cooperate with our major ally, the US.

- *New Zealand's contribution*

New Zealand's National government was cautious in its approach to Vietnam. Prime Minister Keith Holyoake didn't question the morality of New Zealand involvement but he did doubt whether the war could be won.

Our first response was to send a New Zealand Civilian Surgical Team to Qui Nhon in Binh Dinh province in 1963. It remained there until 1975. Under continuing US pressure, the government provided 25 Army engineers in June 1964. Based at Thu Dau Mot, the capital of Binh Duong province, they were engaged in reconstruction projects, such as road and bridge building.

The crucial decision to send combat forces came in May 1965. The Royal New Zealand Artillery's 161 Battery was to be dispatched to South Vietnam, replacing the Engineers in July 1965. The Battery was initially under command of the US Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade, based at Bien Hoa near Saigon. From June 1966 it served with Royal Australian Artillery field regiments at Nui Dat in Phuoc Tuy Province, east of Saigon. The battery was not withdrawn from Vietnam until May 1971.

In May 1967, V (or Victor) Company, a 182-strong rifle company, was deployed to Vietnam from the 1st Battalion of the Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment, which had been based in Malaysia. Victor Company was joined by W (or Whisky) Company in December. They were placed under the 1st Australian Task Force's command, as part of the Royal Australian Regiment's 2nd Battalion, and later other battalions. These rifle companies were deployed

on infantry operations in Phuoc Tuy province. They were replaced several times, usually after a 12-month tour of duty. The third W Company was withdrawn without replacement in November 1970 and the sixth V Company in December 1971.

The 1st New Zealand Services Medical Team arrived in April 1967 to provide medical and surgical assistance to South Vietnamese civilians. The New Zealanders also relieved a US Army medical team and treated military casualties, including Viet Cong prisoners. The team was withdrawn in December 1971.

Several pilots from the Royal New Zealand Air Force were seconded to the Royal Australian Air Force flying Iroquois helicopters. Another two RNZAF officers served as air controllers with the US Air Force until February 1972. RNZAF transport planes also played a key role in supporting New Zealand's effort, both military and civilian, in Vietnam.

In November 1968 a 26- man troop of the New Zealand Special Air Service (SAS) arrived and were attached to the Australian SAS Squadron at Nui Dat. They carried out long-range reconnaissance and ambushed enemy supply routes. Their arrival brought New Zealand's troop strength to its peak during the war, with almost 550 personnel in Vietnam. The SAS were withdrawn in February 1971, having participated in 155 patrols during their deployment.

Fact Sheet 7: 'Vietnamization' and New Zealand's withdrawal from Vietnam

From 1969, under new President Richard Nixon, the American focus in Vietnam shifted to a policy of 'Vietnamization'. The growing list of casualties with no end in sight, coupled with a growing protest movement opposed to the war, contributed to a policy that involved handing the war over to the South Vietnamese army.

The US-led forces had enjoyed some success in containing the advance of the communists but their campaign had encountered many problems. The presence of foreign troops upset the sense of national pride among many Vietnamese, both in the North and South. This was made worse by social problems that had sprung up around US military bases. Prostitution, gambling, drinking and drug taking undermined the image of the western forces. In addition, the widespread bombing campaign over all of Vietnam had increased sympathy and support for North Vietnam and those fighting for unification.

The policy of Vietnamization involved slowly removing foreign forces while at the same time building up the Army of the Republic of Vietnam so that it could fight the war on its own. A key aspect of this policy was helping to train the South Vietnamese army. In 1971 New Zealand sent 25 personnel to help train South Vietnamese territorial forces in Chi Lang. A second training team was sent in February 1972. Based at Dong Ba Thin, near Cam Ranh Bay it helped train Cambodian infantry battalions and provided first-aid instruction and specialist medical training.

The end of the war

New Zealand began to withdraw its combat forces as the training teams were arriving. All of our combat forces were withdrawn before the end of 1971. When Labour won the 1972 general election the new Prime Minister Norman Kirk announced the decision to withdraw both training teams and the New Zealand headquarters in Saigon. New Zealand's formal involvement in the war was over. The fall of the South Vietnamese capital, Saigon, to communist forces in April 1975 concluded a civil war that had cost millions of lives. But conflict in the region had not come to an end.

Fact Sheet 8: The use of defoliants – Agent Orange

A highly controversial aspect of the Vietnam War was the widespread use of herbicides by the United States military. These chemicals caused the leaves of trees in the jungle to die. This made it easier to detect enemy positions and activities, especially from the air. Crops were also sprayed to deprive the enemy of food.

These chemicals included the 'Rainbow Herbicides' – Agent Pink, Agent Green, Agent Purple, Agent Blue, Agent White and, most famously, Agent Orange. The US Air Force sprayed approximately 75 million litres (of which Agent Orange accounted for about 45 million litres) of concentrated herbicides, affecting an estimated 13% of South Vietnam's land.

Humans exposed to Agent Orange were at risk of poisoning. Some estimates suggest that there were as many as 4 million victims of dioxin poisoning in Vietnam. Veterans of the war observed an increased risk of various types of cancer, while birth defects among their children were cited as evidence of the long-term harm caused by Agent Orange. The US government denied any conclusive scientific links between Agent Orange and health problems experienced by those exposed.

In 1984 US veterans obtained a \$180 million settlement from companies which produced Agent Orange. A small trust fund for New Zealanders who had been exposed was established as part of this settlement, but the fund was exhausted before the health problems of many veterans became apparent.

The New Zealand government initially stated that no New Zealanders were deployed in areas where defoliants were used. A 2001 report found no evidence that exposure to defoliants had affected the health of veterans' children, although it did bring new evidence of exposure. In 2003 a Health Committee of Parliament began an inquiry into the health of Vietnam veterans. Its 2004 report identified major flaws in earlier reports and concluded that veterans had been exposed to a 'toxic environment'. The government formally apologised to Vietnam War veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange or other toxic defoliants.

In early 2005, 700 veterans and family members, veterans' organisations and officials formed the Agent Orange Joint Working Group. This group was later known as the Joint Working Group on Concerns of Vietnam Veterans (JWG).

Fact sheet 9: Protest and the Vietnam War

There was a large anti-Vietnam War movement in New Zealand. Worldwide protest against the war centred on the policies and actions of the United States government. Critics of the war in New Zealand accused our government of simply doing what the US told it to. Questions were asked about security arrangements such as ANZUS and SEATO. There were calls for a more 'independent' foreign policy which was not submissive to the US. Opponents of the war also questioned whether communism posed any real threat to New Zealand.

There were moral objections to the war, including objections to the weapons and tactics being used. The extensive US bombing campaigns were major focal point of protest. Anti-Vietnam war groups organised 'mobilisations' against the war and thousands marched in protest in New Zealand's major cities.

Other protests in New Zealand included:

- 1967
 - two members of the left-wing Progressive Youth Movement laid a protest wreath on Anzac Day in Christchurch and were subsequently convicted of disorderly behaviour. Further incidents followed at later Anzac Days as protestors sought to bring attention to their anti-war cause.
 - there were 21 arrests during an Auckland protest against the visit of South Vietnam's Premier, Air Vice-Marshal [Ky](#).
 - police and protesters clashed outside the home of the American consul at Paritai Drive in Auckland
- 1969: Flour bombs, paint and eggs were thrown in protest over a visit of a high-ranking US politician
- 1969: Firecrackers were thrown at an election meeting addressed by the Prime Minister, with 30 arrests.
- 1970: 200 police controlled a riot outside the hotel of the visiting US Vice President, Spiro Agnew.
- 1971: A welcome home parade for 161 Battery was disrupted by a small group of protesters who accused New Zealand soldiers of being murderers and threw red paint, symbolising the Vietnamese blood on their hands.

Prime Minister Holyoake and his National government had their own misgivings about the viability of the war. Publicly they maintained that they were upholding New Zealand's foreign policy principles and treaty obligations. Despite popular sentiment apparently being against the conflict, especially in its final years, Holyoake's National Party was re-elected into government twice after committing combat troops..

For more on the anti-Vietnam War movement in New Zealand go to NZHistory.net.nz

Fact Sheet 10: The Memorandum of Understanding and Tribute08

In 2005 the government established a group to examine the concerns of Vietnam veterans. This group consulted veterans and their families and made recommendations to the government about what action should be taken to address any problems identified. The major outcome from this group's investigations was an agreement known as the [Memorandum of Understanding](#).

This agreement was signed by the government, the Ex-Vietnam Services Association (EVSA) and the Royal Returned and Services Association (RNZRSA) in December 2006.

Prime Minister Helen Clark acknowledged that it had fallen to her government 'to deal with the longer term consequences of New Zealand's involvement in the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s'. The government promised to make a formal public apology to Vietnam veterans and their families. The government also agreed to address ongoing health problems associated with exposure to defoliants. It was also agreed that there would be an official welcome home ceremony.

In 2007 the government provided a \$250,000 payment for a trust to support children of Vietnam veterans and launched *Tribute 08*.

[Tribute08](#) was held in Wellington on Queen's Birthday Weekend 2008. It paid tribute to New Zealand's Vietnam War veterans and their families. Some people might ask why after nearly 40 years such an event was seen as necessary. In simple terms it is because returning New Zealand service personnel were not given any official welcome home at the time (see Fact Sheet 8 Protest and the Vietnam War). Many Vietnam veterans felt shunned and hurt by what they saw as a lack of recognition for their service. One New Zealand Vietnam War veteran, David Grant, described it as 'galling' to come home under cover of darkness without a uniform so as not to attract 'rude remarks'. 'The bad thing about it was the soldiers were blamed for the unpopularity [of the war]. We were sent by the government'.

Some Vietnam veterans also found that their local RSA would not let them join because it did not recognise their war service. When it came to important moments of public commemoration such as Anzac Day many of these veterans did not march because of this sense of rejection. Attitudes have changed in recent years. David Grant has been attending dawn services since the 1980s and as the Second World War generation grows smaller, Vietnam War veterans have become the most visible group of New Zealand veterans to have seen active service.

At *Tribute08* a whakanoa ceremony to honour those killed in action and those veterans who have died since returning home was held. A Memorial Service and rededication of the Vietnam Honour in the National War Memorial was also held.

In announcing *Tribute08*, Helen Clark stated that whatever people's views on the Vietnam War, those who served, 'like other New Zealand soldiers before and after them, undertook their duties bravely, loyally, and professionally.' Phil Goff, the Minister of Defence, acknowledged *Tribute08* as offering a public commemoration that recognised the service of the veterans and the sacrifices of their families. Despite the passage of time it would allow a healing process to occur and help bring closure to Vietnam veterans and their families.

Tribute08 comes 10 years after veterans organised their first ever national reunion and parade – 'Parade '98 – Vietnam Remembered'. For the first time since returning from Vietnam, veterans and their families publicly acknowledged their problems. *Tribute08* is different in that it will be the first occasion in which veterans will receive official recognition of their service.

The Memorandum of Understanding also included provision to extend the eligibility for military personnel who served in the Vietnam War to be awarded medals in recognition of their service. The first 26 recipients of the New Zealand General Service Medal 1992 (Warlike) with Vietnam clasp were presented with their medals in Wellington in May 2008. The Defence Force announced that more than 3000 New Zealand Vietnam veterans were eligible for this medal. The medal and clasp was also available to the surviving spouse or family of Vietnam veterans who had died. The award of these medals represented a significant moment for recipients who felt that at long last their service was being recognised by the country they served.

- See also: [Prime Minister Helen Clark's apology to Vietnam Veterans](#) (Beehive website, 28 May 2008)

Fact Sheet 11: The Vietnam War and its impact on Southeast Asia

On 2 July 1976 the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was declared. Hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese officials were imprisoned in re-education camps after the communist takeover. Tens of thousands died. Vietnam's economy slumped. An estimated two million civilians left the country. These refugees were often called 'boat people' because they fled in crowded, dangerously unfit boats. An unknown number perished at sea.

In 1977 New Zealand accepted 412 Vietnamese refugees. By the end of 1980 there were approximately 2000 Vietnamese refugees in New Zealand.

For more information on [Vietnamese in New Zealand](#) go to the New Zealand Peoples section of Te Ara: The Encyclopedia of New Zealand.

The fighting in Vietnam had destabilised the wider region.

Neighbouring Cambodia was dragged into the conflict. It was bombed by the US air force in an attempt to stop North Vietnamese communists supplying their southern allies via the Ho Chi Minh Trail which ran through eastern Laos and Cambodia. Shortly before the fall of Saigon in 1975 the Cambodian communists, the Khmer Rouge, captured Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia. This was a bitter blow to the Americans. Having tried to stop the spread of communism in the region, it had in fact seen its influence spread.

The fighting in Cambodia also created a refugee problem. Cambodia's population declined dramatically after 1975, as people fled the Khmer Rouge. Under the leadership of Pol Pot, the communists eliminated the country's economic infrastructure and social institutions. They abolished money, schools and private property. They ordered the evacuation of the country's towns and cities, forcing more than 2.5 million civilians into provincial labour camps. Approximately 1.7 million Cambodians perished from starvation, exhaustion and malnutrition. Many were tortured or executed for being 'enemies of the state'.

After repeated border clashes in 1978, Vietnam invaded Cambodia (then called Democratic Kampuchea) and ousted the Khmer Rouge.

There was further fighting in 1979. China and Vietnam fought a brief border war. China had supported the Khmer Rouge. This brief border war is sometimes referred to as the Third Indochina War.

In 1975 about 16,000 Cambodians managed to cross the border into Thailand. By 1979 an estimated 270,000 Cambodians had reached Thai refugee camps. Even after the fall of Pol Pot's regime in 1979 hundreds of thousands continued to flee the country in search of sanctuary in Thailand. Between 1979 and 1992, New Zealand accommodated 4661 Cambodian refugees.

For more information on [Cambodians in New Zealand](#) go to the New Zealand Peoples section of Te Ara: The Encyclopedia of New Zealand.

Meanwhile, in neighbouring Laos, communist forces overthrew the royalist government in December 1975. The Pathet Lao established the Lao People's Democratic Republic.