

Where's the Chest Hair?

Peter Pierce

Paul Anderson

When the Scorpion Stings: The History of the 3rd Cavalry Regiment, Vietnam, 1965–1972
Allen & Unwin, \$49.95hb, 318pp, 1 86508 743 2

Gary McKay and Elizabeth Stewart

Vietnam Shots:

A Photographic Account of Australians at War
Allen & Unwin, \$45hb, 221pp, 1 86508 541 3

ALLEN & UNWIN continues in its role as the most important publisher of Australia's part in the war in Vietnam. The late Paul Anderson's *When the Scorpion Stings* and Gary McKay and Elizabeth Stewart's *Vietnam Shots* are disparate offerings in the terrain that they seek to cover, but each is a solid contribution to an understanding of 'Australia's longest war'. Represented for a short period as a shameful interlude in the nation's history, one better forgotten, the Vietnam War was enfolded within the Anzac legend within fifteen years of the withdrawal of Australian troops. It became a matter of national pride, highlighted by the unveiling of the Vietnam War Memorial in Canberra on 3 October 1992. Thousands marched that day. On an individual level, the laconic digger of earlier wars gave place to the loquacious veteran of Vietnam, his and her stories collected in numerous volumes of oral history.

Against this shifting background, Anderson has sought to redress what he considers to be the neglect of the wartime contributions of one element of the Australian armed forces in Vietnam. *When the Scorpion Stings* is subtitled 'The History of the 3rd Cavalry Regiment, Vietnam, 1965–1972'. McKay and Stewart's *Vietnam Shots* is offered as 'A Photographic Account of Australians at War'. In essence, it is another narrative history of the war with illustrations both familiar and fresh, and superior maps.

Anderson's Preface gives a plain statement of his intention to reflect 'the type of rôles that were undertaken by members of the Regiment and the conditions under which they served and operated'. The Cavalry Regiment drove 'American diesel-fuelled, tracked M113A1 vehicles'. Anderson writes with enthusiasm and insight about the technical aspects of the Armoured Personnel Carriers, the APCs, which were fondly (but he thinks limitingly) known as 'battlefield taxis'. He argues that their rôles and usefulness were much broader, in accord with the regimental emblem of the scorpion, a creature of 'small size but extremely dangerous capabilities'.

Next we are led, engagement by engagement, ambush by ambush, mine by mine, through the regiment's part in the establishment of the Australian Task Force at Nui Dat at the end of the Australian involvement in Vietnam.

Anderson writes acutely of small-scale battlefield operations, as well as the larger actions in which the APCs took part. First of the latter was the most famous Australian battle of the war, 'a large and well-organised ambush' in the rubber plantations at Long Tan. The fight was the result of Viet Cong resistance to the arrival of the Australian Task Force in Phuoc Tuy province in 1966. Pinned down and in danger of being overrun, the infantry was saved by the arrival of the APCs. However, Anderson's claim that this has been played down or out of stories of the battle is an exaggeration. The cavalry did indeed come in time.

When the Scorpion Stings is a detailed account of the daily work of the regiment — the dangers of crossing flooded rivers, the need to find alternatives to mined roads and to armour their vehicles more heavily, the problems of field communication with the infantry. Individual acts of bravery are related (with the implication that the honours won were less than had been deserved). Anderson writes plainly and authoritatively, enriching as he does our knowledge of Australia's Vietnam War. The book ends with a flourish that comes with such an enterprise as this: the 3rd Cavalry Regiment's achievements in the war 'upheld the traditions and fighting qualities of its predecessors, and the actions of the men who fought ... will be forever at the forefront of Australian military history'.

Gary McKay was a conscript who became a platoon commander during the war and an historian after it. Elizabeth Stewart worked on the *Official History of Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts*. The photographs in *Vietnam Shots* have been selected from the extensive collection at the Australian War Memorial and supplemented from other sources. Many of the 'shots' are routine but indispensable images of war, if rarely of battle. Some were for publicity purposes: a hamlet chief smiles at Australian army advisers; village children help a soldier lay bricks for a school; Australian doctors work among Vietnamese civilians. (Which prompts one to ask, where is that ubiquitous figure of so many army propaganda films: the dentist? And where is chest hair, an always perplexing question?) Other photographs are staged. The cover shot of a bare-chested soldier about to throw a grenade was actually taken on a practice range. Other images seem designed to give nostalgic reassurance. Sergeant Peter Buckney, laden with a 35-kilogram pack, looks back alertly at the photographer as he heads down a jungle track. It could be Kokoda, rather than Vietnam.

In *Vietnam Shots* we find much that might have been expected: infantry patrolling in flooded rice paddies and rubber plantations; a chaplain giving the last rites; Johnny O'Keefe and Lorrae Desmond entertaining the troops; General Westmoreland striding away from a helicopter on a

visit to 1RAR; photographs of the four VC winners, all members of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam; Australians and New Zealanders playing cricket at Nui Dat; Prime Minister Holt smiling boyishly as he dons a helmet before visiting soldiers at the front. Supplementing these standard images is a serviceable text, that shows some signs of fatigue: torture allegations were 'blown out of all proportion', 'the use of booby traps and mines kept the Diggers on their toes'. Interpolations from the 'illegal' diary of Lieutenant Neville 'Nobby' Clark give the insights of an idealistic young officer, as vivid in their way as the photographs around them.

What chiefly sets *Vietnam Shots* apart are those images that challenge the complacency that is inevitably a part of historical distance. These are some of them: a dapper Lindsay Hassett drawing the first marble for the second National Service intake of 1966; Nadine Jensen protesting in red paint at the welcome home march for 1RAR; the dolls and cigarette cases that were all the survivors of Long Tan were allowed to accept from a grateful South Vietnamese government. There are harrowing images of Viet Cong killed in a night ambush, of naked enemy suspects, hands tied behind their backs, on *HMAS Perth* (no torture here, presumably). The Tasmanian photographer Neil Davis, later killed in an abortive coup in Bangkok, is represented by the famous image of the end of it all: the North Vietnamese tank breaking through the gates of the Presidential Palace when Saigon 'fell' in 1975.

Village children from Xuyen Moc recoil at the sight of Viet Cong bodies being dragged behind APCs as an example and deterrent to Viet Cong supporters

Two last, contrasting images are perhaps the most arresting of all. One is an exercise in pastoral: fishing boats silhouetted by the rising sun in Phuoc Tuy in 1971, with the Long Hai Hills in the background. The authors' gloss is sentimental — 'most South Vietnamese wanted to live simply and in peace'. Perhaps, but they had to go fishing in wartime as well. The other picture is shocking. The photographer has captured a group of horrified children from Xuyen Moc. We cannot see what has disturbed them, but learn they are looking at the bodies of dead Viet Cong being dragged behind APCs to afford a crude dissuasion to potential sympathisers. Nothing else in *Vietnam Shots* gives so sour and memorable a taste of war.