

# This was the most fearsome army in the Vietnam War

By Blake Stillwell



It might come as a surprise to some that the fighting in Vietnam wasn't limited to the Soviet-backed North or the U.S.-back South Vietnamese forces. Along with Communist China and other Communist movements in the region, who were fighting to reunite the Vietnams under the red banner, there were other belligerent, free countries in the region who had an interest in keeping South Vietnam away from the Commies. Among them was South Korea, whose tactics were sometimes so brutal, they had to be reined in by American forces.

But brutality doesn't always inspire fear, and fear is what struck the hearts of Communist forces when they knew they were up against the Australians. The Aussies brought a death the Viet Cong might never see coming.



(Australian War Memorial)

Today, the picture of the Vietnam War is often American troops on search-and-destroy missions, fighting an often-unseen enemy who blends in with the jungle. When the North Vietnamese Army or the Viet Cong do attack the Americans in this perception, it comes as an unseen, unexpected ambush, routing the Americans and forcing them back to their fire bases. This is not actually how the Vietnam War went – at all. In Vietnam, much of the fighting was also done in the cities and in defense of those firebases. There were even often pitched battles featuring tanks and artillery. In fact, the 1972 Easter Offensive was the largest land movement since the Chinese entered the Korean War, and featured a three-pronged invasion of the South.

So let's not pretend it was rice farmers vs. American soldiers.

But the North Vietnamese forces in the jungle *did* have to worry about a mysterious fighting force, moving silently to close in on them and murder them. They weren't Americans — they were Australians, and they came to Vietnam to win.



Centurion Mark V/1 tanks of C Squadron, 1st Armoured Regiment, Royal Australian Armoured Corps (RAAC), taking up position on the perimeter of Fire Support Base (FSB) Coral, shortly after their arrival at the Base.

(Neil James Ahern)

Australian special operations units would go out into the jungles of Vietnam for *weeks at a time*, often [without saying a word to one another in order to maintain complete silence](#) as they stalked the Northern troops through the jungles. The Australians committed more forces to the war in Vietnam than any other foreign contributor (except for the United States, that is). It was the largest force Australia had ever committed to a foreign conflict to date and was its largest war. But they conducted themselves slightly differently, especially in terms of special operations.

Just like the image of U.S. troops moving through the jungle, dodging booby traps and getting ambushed, the North Vietnamese forces had to face the same tactics when operating against the Australians. Aussies routinely ambushed NVA patrols and booby trapped trails used by the Viet Cong. When they did engage in a pitched battle, such as places like Binh Ba, the Australians weren't afraid to fight hand-to-hand and move house-to-house. In fact, the NVA was beaten so badly at Binh Ba, they were forced to abandon the entire province.



A US Army CH-47 Chinook helicopter delivering stores to 102 Field Battery, Royal Australian Artillery, at Fire Support Base Coral, which is just being established.

(Keith Foster)

The Vietnamese didn't have much luck on the offensive against the Australians, either. When assaulting Firebase Coral-Balmoral in 1968, the Communists outnumbered the Aussies and New Zealanders almost two-to-one. They hit the base with a barrage of mortars in an attempt to draw the ANZAC forces out of the base and chalk up a win against the vaunted Australians. When the 120 Australians came out to clear the mortars, they found way more than a mortar company – they found 2,000 NVA troops surrounding them.

The Aussies fought on, calling sometimes dangerously close artillery strikes from New Zealand and U.S. positions. The outnumbered fought, surrounded, until an Australian relief force came out of the base to help their beleaguered mates. The NVA pressed an attack on the firebase using an entire regiment but were repulsed. Rather than sit and wait to be attacked again, the Aussies

and New Zealanders went out to meet the enemy, this time with Centurion tanks. The battles for Coral-Balmoral went on like that for nearly a month: attack, counter-attack, attack counter-attack. The NVA had strength in numbers but the Aussies had pure strength.

Eventually the NVA would be routed and would avoid Nui Dat Province for as long as the Australians were defending it.