



ABOVE: Laden with equipment, the first load of troops to reach H.M.A.S. Sydney clamber up a gangway from a landing craft. BELOW: High above them, on the carrier's horse flight deck, was a disarray of trucks, bound for Cambodia as part of Australia's civil aid programme. This picture shows only half the trucks, looking towards the aft section of the carrier. (Alan Trotter photos)

TOWNSVILLE'S TROOPS LEAVE FOR VIETNAM

Members of Townsville's 4th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, left for Vietnam yesterday, aboard the troop-carrier, H.M.A.S. Sydney.

The former aircraft carrier moved from its anchorage in Cleveland Bay shortly after mid-day, carrying 500 officers and men of the battalion.

They are to replace another Townsville-based unit, the R.A.R., which is expected to return to Australia in about three months.

There were emotional scenes in Anson Park early yesterday morning as the troops were farewelled by the battalion. About 300 people gathered in the earth-shaking rain as the troops were made ready.

An army band played the ground-rolled figures watched off to board a last of the landing craft to take them out to the Sydney.

Laden with heavy loads and with weapons slung over their shoulders, the troops, half of them national servicemen, chat-

ted cheerfully among themselves in the landing craft. To a man they were eager to go to Vietnam.

In dead calm conditions, they went aboard the carrier via a gangway almost without a hitch. The first landing craft, carrying members of Bravo Company left at 11 a.m., half an hour later the others followed.

When President left the troop carrier about 10.30 a.m., three more landing craft were waiting to be unladen.

DIFFICULT

Weighed down by their equipment, the soldiers found the climb up the gangway a difficult job. As they were checked out, they found a convenient spot and took a breather.

It had been a long day. The men had been crisscrossed at 4.30 a.m. to begin preparations for what was the battalion's third tour overseas. In 1968 it fought in Vietnam and before that it was in Malaya and Borneo in 1962-66.

Many of the members of the battalion spent their last night in the city with their families. But some of the single men made a final round of the base.

Only three men were celebrated. Two were charged on minor counts and forfeited their tour of the battalion. The third, who was charged with assaulting a police officer, missed the boat. He appeared in court and was remanded for one week.

The others were at the barracks at midnight, to receive a final roll call on board.

Brigadier D. B. Thomson, officer commanding the Army's 3rd Task Force, which includes 4 R.A.R., flew out to the troop carrier aboard a helicopter to see a final farewell to the troops.

As a colonel, he was commanding officer of 4 R.A.R. when it was formed in February 1964 — the first foreign battalion to be raised on Australian soil.

In Vietnam, the troops aboard Sydney will soon be in a combat zone of 118 men, who first overseas on May 1. They will also link up with a New Zealand rifle company of 120 men.

WELL-TRAINED

The battalion is probably the best trained Australian unit ever to serve in Vietnam. It has been undergoing intensive training since last June in the North Queensland area and at Camps, and has performed well during a series of exercises.

Bravo Company's commander, Major Bob Richards, said that the training had been aimed at producing fit, competent individuals and then adding them into a team.

"We have a very sound base of experience, and we have benefited from what other battalions have learned in Vietnam," he said.

"We have been in very close touch with the other battalions in Vietnam, and we are aware of the

latest trends there." The battalion's experience will come from such men as Sergeant Brian Purton, who has seen 48 men who have served with the battalion in 48 of its operations.

He has had 10 years of service and he said he is still looking forward to the 10th.

"It's my job," he explained, "but he said it clear that this would be his last operation tour." "The last time I was in Vietnam, my company was clean. Nobody was killed or wounded, but you can't afford to know your

men and the 126 other members of the battalion will come from Vietnam for a second tour. It's a good thing to have the skills that kept them out of trouble."

EAGER

The others may lack experience, but they make up for it in eagerness.

Typical of them is a young officer, Lieutenant D. J. McKay. He was born in Queensland and served in Vietnam. He was to have gone to Vietnam in 1966, but an accident made him unfit.

"I really want to go," he said. "I think it's probably my last tour." Lieutenant McKay is a national serviceman who decided to make the Army a full-time job.

Private Wayne Clarke of Hockhampton, is one of the youngest members of the battalion. Aged 19, he is a regular soldier.

"I'm a bit scared," he admitted. "But, all the same I am looking forward to it. I feel pretty safe because they don't seem to do much to do a job. You have to work as a team, and you are gone, and we

Private Wayne Hammond, of Townsville, agrees. Aged 21, Wayne is a national serviceman.

"It's a job we have to do, and I think we are pretty well trained for it." "My parents aren't pleased about me going, but they understand."

Private Terence Connor, 21, of Mackay, sees the tour as a chance of having a look at some of the world.

NOT WORRIED

He is not particularly worried about the prospect of action. "We have been trained to fight," he said, "and you have to take it as it comes."

As they talked, a busy force helicopter whirled between the carrier and the battalion, carrying out supervising officers.

It landed on the rear of the carrier's former flight deck. There was little room to move. The rest of the area was taken up with 114 trucks which are being presented to the Cambodian Government as part of Australia's civil aid programme.

In the meantime, below several small boats circled Sydney, watching the proceedings. They lodged the singly landing craft, a Navy cutter, and a large motor at the seaward side, leading the troops' heavy tug and six other boats.

When the men of 4 R.A.R. march away this morning, they'll leave behind them more than 500 wives, mothers and sweethearts.

Most of them will be there to watch their men file aboard landing craft which will take them out to M.A.S. Sydney, bound for Vietnam.

To a man, the members of the battalion will be eager, if somewhat apprehensive, at the prospect of combat. This is what they have been training for in 12 months of intensive preparations.

But their women are less enthusiastic. Like most Army wives, they have maintained a brave front — a shell that will probably break this morning as they farewell the battalion.

When the tears have dried, they face 12 months of loneliness and uncertainty. It will be at least six months before most of them see their husbands, and then only for a five-day rest and recuperation period.

They will wave their husbands off to fight, with the unspoken fear that this could be a last farewell.

From today, every knock on the door could bring bad news. Every radio broadcast, every newspaper will be greeted with apprehension.

For the next year, they must handle every family crisis alone. They must be mother and father to their children.

THE WOMEN WHO WILL STAY HOME

But yesterday there was little indication of the imminent parting.

There was no sign of emotion, no tension. It was obvious that they had prepared themselves.

In 10 years as a soldier's wife Mrs. Lorraine Porter has gone through it all before. It doesn't get any easier.

Her husband, Sergeant Brian Porter, has already fought in Vietnam. Before that, he served a tour in Borneo.

"The worst part is the worry that something might happen to him," Mrs. Porter said yesterday. "You are always dreading an Army car pulling up outside."

She admits to being badly shaken during her husband's last trip to Vietnam. "An Army car pulled up outside our house," she said, "and I thought they were going to tell me Brian had been hit, but they were looking for someone else."

The fear is heightened by loneliness. "I was very lonely last time," Mrs. Porter said, "but the kids are older now, and they'll keep me company."

The Porters have three sons, two of whom realise that their father is going away to fight.

They will probably not see him for eight months. "I try to leave R. and R. leave as long as possible," Sgt. Porter explained. "Then when you go back you know it's only for a few more months."

Mrs. Carolyn McKay has adopted a matter-of-fact attitude to her husband's service in a combat area, despite the fact that she and her husband, Lieutenant G. J. McKay, have been married only eight months. "I knew when I married him that he would have to go overseas, and I accept it," she said.

"He loves the Army and if that's what he wants, I'm happy about it."

She says she is worried at the chance that her husband may be wounded, "but then again he can be hurt in a car accident just the same."

Lieut. McKay and his wife have discussed the possibility that he could be killed in Vietnam. "It's no use ignoring it," Lieut. McKay said. "I have settled my estate if something does happen."

Mrs. McKay plans to go to Hong Kong to meet her husband on his R. and R. leave.

Until then, she will remain in Townsville. "I am working here and I

can't see the sense of going back to Sydney," she said.

She will probably join in the activities of the battalion Wives' Club, a type of self-help organization on which the wives of soldiers serving overseas can lean for support.

Like the other wives, she will be able to use the sporting facilities provided at Lavarrack Barracks.

The Army does look after its wives. A families liaison section has been established to help with any difficulties they may encounter.

This section also organized lectures for wives to prepare them for their husbands' time overseas.

"They told us what to do if anything should happen to our husbands," says Mrs. Jean Smith, "and they will help us with anything we need."

"It's good to know there's somebody there if you do get into difficulties."

Mrs. Smith's husband, Corporal Vince Smith, has been in the Army for 28 months as a cook.

This is his first tour overseas.

"I'm not looking forward to it," Mrs. Smith said, "but I am not worried about it."



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Fishpackers Union.