Hanoi scales back Australian attempt to commemorate Vietnam War battle

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Controversy erupted last week over the decision of the Vietnamese government to dramatically scale back a planned Australian commemoration at the site of the August 18, 1966 clash that is called the Battle of Long Tan by Australian military historians. The engagement, in which 18 Australian troops and several hundred Vietnamese fighters were killed, has become the focus of annual ceremonies marking Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War. In 1987, August 18 was designated "Vietnam Memorial Day."

Since 1989, Vietnam has allowed small groups of 20 to 40 people, mainly veterans, to gather at a small cross that marks the battlefield in what was once Phuoc Tuy province of South Vietnam. In 2002, it allowed Australian veterans' organisation to erect a small monument—one of the only memorials to foreign troops who fought in the country. Vietnam has always insisted, however, that no flags, uniforms or medals be displayed, and that any commemoration be kept low key. It was not until the 40th anniversary in 2006 that Vietnam allowed the playing of the "last post"—the bugle salute to fallen soldiers.

Three million Vietnamese died as a result of the war by US imperialism and its allies, including Australia and New Zealand, to shore up a puppet government in the south of the country against the national liberation movement dominated by the Vietnamese Stalinist party. More bombs were dropped on North and South Vietnam by American aircraft than were used by all sides during the Second World War. Chemical defoliants, including Agent Orange, have left a legacy that includes three million people affected by illness and generations of birth defects.

Any hint of Australian imperialism celebrating its alleged victory at Long Tan would be certain to provoke outrage in Vietnam, especially among the families of the war dead.

Disregarding Vietnamese sensitivities, the Australian political establishment planned major activities for the 50th anniversary of the battle, as part of the broader four-year glorification of Australian military exploits that began in 2014 around the centenary of World War I. Under conditions in which Australia has participated in the neo-colonial wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and is allied with the United States in escalating preparations for a military confrontation with China and Russia, the Australian population is being subjected to constant propaganda about the "heroes" who gave their lives for the "nation." Attempts are being made to indoctrinate youth in particular to be uncritical of the real motives behind wars and deferential to the military.

In regards to Vietnam, the ever-more prominent commemorations of the conflict, in which 521 Australians died and 3,000 were wounded, have been accompanied by systematic attempts to justify the war itself. School text books baldly assert that Australia joined the US intervention to defend Asia from "the spread of communism," not the truth that it was assisting Washington to suppress the legitimate anti-colonial struggle by the Vietnamese people.

Events marking episodes in the Vietnam War exclude the reality that by the late 1960s, millions of Americans and Australians had come to view it as a shameful, imperialist enterprise—including large numbers of the soldiers who had been sent to fight in it. The legacy of the bitter experience was immense public hostility to any involvement in overseas military interventions and operations. The ruling class has had to make strenuous efforts to overcome that anti-war sentiment, especially through the "war on terrorism" propaganda of the past 15 years.

In part reflecting the protracted political rehabilitation of involvement in the conflict, as many as 3,500 Australians and New Zealanders, including hundreds of surviving veterans and the children and grandchildren of

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veterans, travelled to Vietnam for the 50th anniversary of Long Tan. (New Zealand also had troops involved in the battle.)

Crews from Australian television stations were on hand, including a team from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) filming a "documentary" on the events. In Australia itself, coverage of the anniversary was typified by an ABC feature that gloated "How 100 Australians held off 2,000 Viet Cong" and hailed the battle as a "decisive victory."

Organisers intended for a mass gathering at the battlefield monument, which is situated inside a farm and surrounded by corn fields. The service at the site was to coincide with ceremonies at war memorials across Australia and to be followed by a "gala dinner" and a concert at a luxury hotel. Anniversary caps, badges, T-shirts and even beer mugs, among other "souvenirs," were being sold by vendors in the streets of the nearby town of Vung Tau. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that the Australian visitors, some of whom had paid thousands of dollars for "Long Tan Trek Tours," had "packed the town's bars and restaurants."

One can only imagine the questions being asked in Vietnam in response to the spectacle. Would speeches be made glorifying the killing of hundreds of Vietnamese fighters? Would the US government be next, demanding to commemorate its purported "victories" in its war on the Vietnamese people?

According to most reports, permission for the commemorations had largely been worked out with local authorities. On August 16, the Vietnamese national government intervened and notified Australian officials that the ceremony would not be allowed to proceed. A Vietnamese source told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "They don't want to see triumphalism."

The actions of the Hanoi authorities were greeted with arrogant indignation by the Australian government. Minister for Veteran Affairs Dan Tehan declared: "For us to be given such short notice of the cancellation is, to put it in very frank terms, a kick in the guts."

In fact, the Australian government and veterans' organisations had known for a considerable time that there was tremendous unease in Vietnam about the scale and character of the commemorations. Harry Smith, who commanded the company at the centre of the battle, D Company of the 6th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, told the ABC on August 19: "It was mentioned some weeks ago when I was in Canberra that Hanoi was a bit worried about the number of people expected—like 3,000—and it was getting too much, too big, getting out of hand."

In comments to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Smith expressed sympathy for Vietnam's stance: "The way it's turned out is that Long Tan has been advertised on tickets and advertised on brochures and various things, which is what the Hanoi government said [was] not to happen. It's happened and therefore they've pulled the blind down."

In the end, Vietnam made some limited concessions after frantic appeals by Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. It allowed a wreath to be laid at the cross and groups of up to 100 people to gather at the monument for short periods. Access was sealed off after several hours, however, and the concert was cancelled. The "gala dinner" proceeded at the upmarket hotel but no speeches were allowed.

Malcolm Turnbull complained the following day that only 700 of the Australian and New Zealand visitors had been admitted to the site and asserted that the Vietnamese government's decision "to change the rules literally the day before was very unreasonable."

In the final analysis, the angst of Turnbull and others in the Australian establishment stems from the fact that Vietnam's actions disrupted their plans to exploit the anniversary of Long Tan for contemporary purposes. They were prevented from using imagery of Australian veterans at the battle site in the same way they used the April 25, 2015 Anzac Day commemorations on the beach at Gallipoli in Turkey—as patriotic propaganda about a mythical Australian military prowess and to justify past and present wars.

Incredibly, at the main commemoration of Long Tan held at the War Memorial in Canberra on August 18, two US Air Force B-52 bombers were flown over the service. The indiscriminate "strategic" bombing of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos by B-52s claimed the lives of uncounted numbers of civilians and ranks among the greatest war crimes committed during the conflict by US imperialism and its allies.

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