

Willy Bach thesis: Australian Colonel FP ('Ted') Serong and counterinsurgency in Vietnam (pp. 54-59; page breaks as in original)

Chapter 2

Collaboration in Warlike Operations and Counterinsurgency

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Colonel Francis Philip "Ted" Serong

Colonel "Ted" Serong was the first commander of the AATTV, which was a SAS special forces highly secret project to train Rhade Montagnards in covert modern warfare. From 1962 onwards, Australian special forces troops, serving with AATTV, under Serong's command were involved in the implementation of Thompson's plan in the Central Highlands, as described above. Both Serong and Thompson worked closely with Diệm, US commanders and the CIA. British and Australian CW exponents in the Vietnamese Central Highlands led to fractious relationships with US commanders, particularly General Paul Harkins, commanding MACV, as Harkins favoured a heavier reliance on the use of overwhelming force. Serong conveyed his dismay to Harkins, regarding the intentions of the South Vietnamese forces he also commanded. This was noted by J.P. Harris:

Note: 'AATTV' is the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (see note 91 below and [this television program now on video](#)).

Their aim in the High Plateau is the subjugation of the Montagnards, their destruction as an ethnic identity, and the incorporation of the Montagnard people and the Montagnard land in an integrated Vietnamese community. Serong doubted that Australians and Americans should “allow ourselves to be used as a catspaw in an operation that has an excellent prospect of finishing as genocide.”⁷²

Regular troops were also employed to carry out relocation operations, as Paul Ham illustrated. Another Australian officer, Peter Francis Leahy, who later retired as a Lieutenant General, wrote a detailed critique of the Strategic Hamlets programme.⁷³ Australian Sergeant, Bill Fogarty, who served in Phước Tuy with the Fire Assault Platoon, 7RAR, wrote in a letter to his family: “Dear Dad ... we are going to relocate about three villages ... all houses are to be destroyed, crops burned etc. These people will go to a new village closer to Nui Dat.”⁷⁴

Australian Captain, Peter Hudson, OC, 1st Psychological Operations Unit, described the village of Ap Sui Nghệ as, “a hamlet without a soul”.⁷⁵ Ham further quoted Colonel John Warr: “The ‘hearts and minds campaign’ ... does not seem to be working in this village. The villagers appear sullen and uncooperative”.⁷⁶ “The erection of a barbed-wire fence 2 metres high around Hoa Long merely inflamed an already hostile people”, Ham concluded.⁷⁷

In 1967 the British FCO was seeking abridged editions of Thompson’s handbook, *Defeating Communist Insurgency* in Thai and Tagalog, in spite of the contestable success of BRIAM. The Philippines and Thai links confirmed that both nations were US client states, characterised by corrupt authoritarian governance, indigenous unrest and repression, as Sir Robert Thompson acknowledged.⁷⁸ Thai script could also be read by literate Laotian officers of the Royalist Army. Implementation in Thailand was intended to suppress cross-border Pathet Lao operations and local insurgents. This underlined the intention to implement the programme in North East Thailand. In 1967 the British Information Research Department

⁷² J.P. Harris, "The Buon Enao Experiment and American Counterinsurgency," *Sandhurst Occasional Papers*, No. 13 (2013): 32 Note 78.

⁷³ Peter Francis Leahy, “Why Did the Strategic Hamlet Program Fail?” (Ohio: eHistory at The Ohio State University 2011), <http://ehistory.osu.edu/vietnam/essays/hamlets/index.cfm> electronic. 153-58.(Date accessed 12 October 2011).

⁷⁴ Paul Ham, *Vietnam: The Australian War* (Sydney: Harper Collins Publishers, 2007), 321.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 325

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Sir Robert Thompson, "Defeating Communist Insurgency," Foreign Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office: Information Research Department (London: 1967), *NAUK*, FCO 95/339 n.p.

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(IRD) of the FCO was also still offering its counterinsurgency services to the Royal Laotian government with its “proposed visits by Head of Malaysian Psychological Warfare Division to Vientiane, and by Laotian provincial governors to Malaysia”.⁷⁹ Browning and Forman examined the legal implications of coerced relocation of civilians. “...mass deportation of the civilian population” was in breach of the Nürnberg Principles, as it was an “...obligation of an occupying power” to provide Protection of Civilian Persons.⁸⁰

BRIAM could not be described as a *token* of Britain’s commitment to the US special relationship. It involved South Vietnamese forces, other allies, irregular Montagnard units, Australian and New Zealand special forces and regular field units. MI6 and CIA, as well as the US command structure, were integral to BRIAM activities, as were the use of instruments like air strikes, search and destroy operations, and defoliants. Although Thompson’s plan was seen to have miscarried, US CW practitioners continued his work, acknowledging his influence, adapting from his methods and, as Kate Tietzen explained, adapting their own methods when preferred.⁸¹ As ‘hearts and minds’ approaches ultimately failed, there was an inevitable progression from universal suspicion to the Phoenix Program, which involved the assassination of scores of thousands of local people with little if any suspicion. The ‘targeted killings’ were an inevitable result of US, and British CW doctrine. ‘Targeted killings’ without any moral considerations were integral to the doctrine, *not* an aberration, as Tal Tovv explained in his case study.⁸²

Petersen was a rare Australian officer who had gained the trust of the Rhade people around Ban Mê Thuôt, and who had the conviction of his conscience to raise misgivings regarding the next logical step in the process, following his instructions from CIA officer, Stu Methven. Phoenix and its affiliates would see the Rhade wiped out by the Vietnamese:

I was seeing a lot of Stu Methven following my return to the highlands....

⁷⁹ "Laos: Proposed Visits by Head of Malaysian Psychological Warfare Division to Vientiane, and by Laotian Provincial Governors to Malaysia 1967 Jan 01 - 1968 Dec 31," Foreign and Commonwealth Office (London: 1967), *NAUK*, FCO 95/168, n.p.

⁸⁰ Frank Browning and Dorothy Forman, *The Wasted Nations: Report of the International Commission of Enquiry into United States Crimes in Indochina, June 20-25, 1971*, 297-8.

⁸¹ Kate Tietzen, "'They Were Hard Nuts': The Australians in Vietnam, 1962-1972 a Focus on the American Failure to Make Maximum Use of the Australians' Counterinsurgency Tactics in South Vietnam," PhD (2014): 1-23.

⁸² Tal Tovv, "The Theoretical Aspect of Targeted Killings: The Phoenix Program as a Case Study," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 11, No. 4 (2009): 2-23.

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I didn't know it at the time, but what he was proposing later became an element of the Phoenix Program...instigated and funded by the covert Action Branch of the CIA...

When I first heard the proposal from Methven, I didn't know the full story. But I didn't like the idea at all.

'You want me to form teams of professional assassins,' I said.

'Call them that if you like,' Methven said. 'But we need them. Start looking around for the right guys and build up a couple of teams.'⁸³

William Rosenau and Austin Long acknowledged the inevitability that CW and its disappointments would lead to the excesses of the Phoenix Program or its equivalents and recommending that in future conflicts these measures should be applied with more effectiveness. The use of the word 'infrastructure' represented rest areas, clinics and hospitals for the wounded as well as command posts and logistics depots and civilian areas:

One of the principal requirements of counterinsurgency is the ability to disrupt or destroy not just the insurgency's military capabilities but also the infrastructure that supports the insurgent forces.⁸⁴

Like other Anglosphere CW experts, Serong vigorously opposed US methods and resisted what he regarded as unreasonable demands to transform the Rhade Montagnard unit into assassin teams, and the implicit breaches of the trust cultivated with the Rhade of Buôn Enao Civilian Irregular Defense Group program (CIDG). Australian officer, David Wilkins, Adjutant and OC, C Company, 2nd Tour, expressly stated that some members of the AATTV also had roles in the Phoenix Program. Ian McNeill listed Serong's consultancy work: adviser to US General Harkins, attached to U.S. State Department, RAND Corporation, MACV, Montagnards, Republic of Vietnam National Police Field Force (NPFF), secondment to Australian Defence Department, USAID, and USOM.⁸⁵ Serong could be said to have managed his reputation skilfully in civilian life. His biographer, Anne Blair and US

⁸³ Petersen, *Tiger Men an Australian Soldier's Secret War in Vietnam*, 116-7.

⁸⁴ William Rosenau and Austin Long, "The Phoenix Program and Contemporary Counterinsurgency," (Santa Monica, CA: DTIC Document, 2009), Preface iii.

⁸⁵ Ian McNeill, *The Team: Australian Army Advisors in Vietnam, 1962-1972* (University of Queensland Press in association with the Australian War Memorial, 1984), 11, 197, 412, 386, 196, 414, 42, 44, 47, 50-1, 12-14.

researcher, Kate Tietzen both wrote in great detail on his exploits without mention of the Phoenix Program. Similarly, Serong's obituary on 12 November 2002 by John Farquharson, omitted this important detail from his little-explained role in the war zone over a ten-year period. Farquharson, however, did claim that Serong left the Australian Army in 1968, with the rank of Brigadier, not Colonel:

During those Vietnam years he was also a consultant to the Pentagon and to the policy planners of three American presidents - John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. He was one of the last to leave, flying out in the final airlift by the US embassy helicopter on April 29, 1975, the day before the fall of Saigon.⁸⁶

Valentine made numerous references to both Thompson, who continued in or returned to Việt Nam after the disbandment of BRIAM to work with the CIA, and Serong, who had left the Australian Army and was working for the CIA via a sinecure position with USAID and RAND, as Duong Van Mai Elliott explained:

In 1968, the CIA instructed Serong to secure a contract with RAND to acquire a "suitable cover for his continuing operations in Vietnam," and Serong retired from the Australian Army.⁸⁷

Serong did not make significant contributions at RAND. In Saigon, he would appear occasionally at the RAND office, and the staff used to wonder what he was really doing and for whom he was really working, and some would speculate—correctly, it turned out—that he was in the pay of the CIA." George Tanham [a RAND Corporation employee], who met Serong in Saigon and later in Bangkok, would recall that "Serong was always very busy, but it was not always clear what he was up to."⁸⁸

Both Serong and Thompson were deeply involved in the command of the Phoenix Program, which began in 1967 and continued till 1972, and with some aspects till 1975. Valentine described their roles:

⁸⁶ John Farquharson, "Counter-Insurgency Jungle Warrior Brigadier Ted Serong, Military Tactician 1915-2002," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 November 2002, 25.

⁸⁷ Elliott, "RAND in Southeast Asia: A History of the Vietnam War Era," 39.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

The British found this necessary in Malaya, and they created Police Field Forces there. In fact, the original idea of the Vietnamese Police Field Forces came out of Malaya. Robert Thompson recommended it. And when I got to Vietnam, they had a contract Australian ... who had taken over for himself the Police Field Forces: Ted Serong.⁸⁹

In 1974 this was the situation reported by Valentine:

...Frank Snepp continued to interrogate prisoners at the National Interrogation Center. Robert Thompson returned as an adviser to the National Police, and Ted Serong returned as an adviser to the Joint General Staff.⁹⁰

The Australian War Memorial supported Valentine's view of AATTV and Serong's role in Phoenix, putting this evidence, as far as it goes, beyond dispute. It was even more curious, however, that the AWM, with its scrupulous attention to detail, listed Serong's service in Việt Nam the Australian Army, AATTV from 1962-1965 and his final rank as Colonel, not Brigadier, as claimed by Farquharson:

From the beginning the AATTV was divided into groups and dispersed. Some worked with Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) units, some with indigenous peoples in the remote, mountainous areas of the country's north-west, some with South Vietnam's Civil Guard which was responsible for protecting key provincial infrastructure, some with the ARVN's elite Ranger units and some with the American Combined Studies Division which trained village militias and which was also involved in the Phoenix Program that targeted Viet Cong cells and cadres for assassination.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Valentine, *The Phoenix Program*, 47.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁹¹ "The Australian Army Training Team Vietnam," Australian War Memorial, <http://vietnam-war.commemoration.gov.au/vietnam-war/australian-army-adv isors.php#> (Date accessed 17 May 2015)