

Summary of December Address

Guest Speaker – Ian Mackay
Perspective”

Subject: “Vietnam Operations – An Historical

Introduced by Ray Hyslop, a fellow pupil from his school days, Ian’s resume disclosed details of distinguished military service. Graduating from the Royal Military College, Duntroon and the Australian National University, he was a founding member in 1957 of 1 Special Air Service Company that subsequently became the SAS Regiment. He served in Malaya, Malaysia, and during 1966-67 was Officer Commanding B Company Sixth Battalion RAR in South Vietnam, subsequently appointed Commanding Officer Seventh Battalion RAR. Whilst attending the Staff College at Quetta, Pakistan he spent considerable time in Afghanistan during a turbulent period. (*Has it ever been any different? Ed.*)

He is also a graduate and former instructor of the Joint Services Staff College, instructor in Military History at Duntroon, with his last ADF appointment Colonel, Military Staff, Strategic International Policy in Defence Headquarters.

His post military experience includes a number of senior executive appointments, also a consulting role to a number of Asian governments.

During the 1960’s Ian was an instructor at the British Jungle Warfare School in Malaya that is regarded as having been a Battle School for Vietnam.

Much of his presentation related to his experiences in an operation known as the Bribie Island Battle in Vietnam. He was able to bring realism to the story by including original charts and details of manoeuvres, specific references to bravery and the distinct Aussie character of a number of those serving under him.

He illustrated some of the frustration that occurs due to circumstances in the heat of battle, also how the media can be guilty of exaggeration in reporting events. He considers that the lack of political awareness of just how formidable the Vietnamese were (they threw the Chinese out) contributed to eventual outcome of the war.

We lost over 500 killed in action over 10 years in Vietnam - by way of comparison we have lost 3 in Iraq none of whom were killed in combat. He paid particular tribute to our National Servicemen who served in Vietnam – they made up at least 50% of our contingent.

Commenting on the current situation in Afghanistan, he considers The US and Australia face a similar dilemma to that faced in Vietnam. Responding to a question, he considers that whilst our men are doing a tremendous job there, it is difficult to currently see a solution – and Pakistan is also a big problem. Whilst the Afghans are great at killing each other, they unify if invaded. The Russians could not beat them and the US is seen as an invader.

Queried on the relatively recent change in policy that provides for “bringing home the bodies” his own opinion is not in favour. He considers it terrible for grieving families to have to face up to 3 bereavement events – the death, the arrival home and the burial. The practice was started by the Americans, and now it is in place he considers it will continue.

Keith Morel who also served in Vietnam conveyed appropriate appreciation to Ian for giving us a first hand perspective on certain events that occurred during that conflict.