

Search and Re-Search: Operation Mitchell

Helen Creagh

During 1982 the Australian Army undertook a search of records held by the Australian War Memorial of units which served in Vietnam. As a result of information collected in that search, a report was compiled dealing with the use of chemicals by Australian troops in Vietnam.

This article deals with procedures and archival matters arising in the course of the search and assesses the significance of the outcome.

There occurred in December 1982 two events of significance for the proponents of open government in Australia and of special interest to those who deal with the processing of information and records. It is among the latter, especially staff working in areas of Commonwealth government record-keeping and control, that the greatest impact will be felt.

On 1 December 1982, proclamation of the Freedom of Information Act assented to on 9 March 1982, put into effect the provisions of the Act regarding access to Commonwealth records created from the proclamation date. Commonwealth government agencies have responded in various ways to the demands of the Act. These varying reactions can be tested currently only by the practice of requesting records under the terms of the legislation and comparing responses. After protracted and often heated debate on the Bill and continuing, though intermittent, media coverage of its progress and of the debate, the consequences of its existence and the reality of its operation have so far caused little apparent comment. Perhaps it is too soon to gauge any effect either on the provision of public information or on the bureaucracy; perhaps it will require an issue of national concern to indicate what the real worth might be.

Of more immediate significance is the second of these two events. In spite of its import, the event itself has passed almost without recognition except by those involved in preparation for it.

On 9 December 1982, the Minister for Defence, Mr Ian Sinclair, tabled in the House of Representatives a comprehensive report prepared by the Australian Army entitled *Report on the Use of Herbicides and Insecticides and other Chemicals by the Australian Army in South Vietnam*.

In his tabling speech, the Minister sketched an outline of the process of

compiling the information required to produce the report. The project was based on a search of records held in archival custody. Given the scope and intensity of that search, some more detailed account of the underlying reasons for undertaking such a task, and the organisation involved in proceeding with it, seems worthwhile.

The use of defoliant chemicals during the war in Vietnam has been the subject of controversy since this first became public knowledge in the late 1960s. Although weedicides and insecticides have been widely used in agriculture for decades, a growing awareness of the long term consequences of such usage has aroused debate over the employment of chemical control of pests. Even when this seems desirable — mostly in a commercial context though often for reasons of hygiene and control of disease-carrying insects — there has been increasing concern over the effects on natural means of control.

Use of herbicides was introduced in Vietnam as a means of controlling availability of food supplies to the Viet Cong as well as for defoliating the dense jungle which provided concealment and shelter for the guerilla forces against which Republican and Military Assistance Forces were operating. Herbicides were therefore employed for defoliant and anticrop purposes.

There was growing controversy in the United States over the long term effects on humans of the intensive application of herbicides as practised in Vietnam. The controversy was aroused also in Australia since Australian forces operated in areas subject to defoliation and crop destruction programmes and the question was ultimately posed regarding possible application of herbicides by Australian troops serving in Vietnam.

Such questions always demand examination of appropriate records to provide answers and searches were duly made. The results indicated that no record existed which showed evidence of actual usage of herbicides by Australian troops in Vietnam.

As with all research, the first step towards investigating a hypothesis (or as in this instance answering a Parliamentary question) is to decide which are appropriate sources of information. The nature of the hypothesis is itself an indicator and in this case, a question of "whether or not" would seem to indicate a matter of policy decision-making. These were indeed the records searched: policy files held by Army Office in the Department of Defence, Canberra. Searches were conducted under pressure with a requirement that answers be provided within a matter of a few days. Records searched were therefore always those apparently the most likely to produce an answer to the question posed. In each instance where such searches were carried out, the answer was to the effect that there was no evidence on record of Australian troops using herbicides in Vietnam.

Between November 1981 and March 1982, records of the Australian

Army participation in operations in Vietnam were transferred to the Australian War Memorial. This is normal procedure for operational records considered worthy of permanent retention and follows the pattern set in the 1914-18 war period. Adherence to this practice has established the Memorial as the principal repository for records of Australia's involvement in war. The Memorial's role as the only institution, apart from the Australian Archives, empowered to retain custody of Commonwealth records of agencies other than its own, has always been maintained. It became the first institution ever to gather Commonwealth records, a function existing from its creation as the Australian War Museum in 1918 and continuing throughout its history. The Australian War Memorial Act, passed in 1925, changed the name of the institution but sustained its archival role as has every subsequent Act. The Australian War Memorial Act 1980 expanded further the powers of the Memorial to collect records, directing that it should acquire material relating to any period of Australia's military history and the history of the Defence Forces. This transfer of records from the Vietnam conflict was but the most recent in a long succession of similar events.

The Vietnam records as transferred totalled approximately 500 metres — in excess of 20,000 items covering the period 1965-1972. The transfer comprised registered and un-registered records of units based in Vietnam and unit Commanders' Diaries. The former include the normal sequence of records generated by units in pursuing their designated functions — correspondence files recording the administration of tasks undertaken by each unit such as the transport of personnel and stores, provision of stores and equipment, maintenance of equipment, provision of accommodation and medical services as well as the obvious arrangements involved in preparing for and taking part in the real operations of patrol and action against the enemy. They are then a natural outcome of the Army at work, in this instance actually at war outside Australia.

The Commanders' Diaries are of a different nature. These "war diaries" are the formal official diary record of the unit at work, kept by direction and kept only while a unit is on active service. They are then artificial rather than generic. While the diary is a daily record, no great detail is evident and only really significant events are noted. The diary appendices, however, are often more informative as they include such documents as Operation Instructions, After Action Reports, Intelligence Summaries and, particularly with respect to operations, Message Logs. All of these by contrast with the diary proper are "natural" rather than "artificial" records.

It can be seen then that while policy files might record deliberations and decisions on particular options, operational records are a reflection of the role and activities of units in the field. As such there would appear to be little likelihood of their containing information regarding herbicide use

which was not included in Army Headquarter's policy files. Given the very short periods allowed for previous searches, no real attempt was made therefore to investigate closely the possible existence of new or different information in records of this nature.

There was possibly another factor which contributed to the exclusion of the operational records from previous searches. The order for Australian troops to withdraw from operations in Vietnam followed immediately the forming of the Whitlam government in December 1972, after Labor's victory in an election where the question of Australian involvement in that conflict was one of the major campaign issues. In the administrative arrangements set up by the new government, the Departments of Defence, Army, Navy, Air and Supply were all abolished and replaced by a single Department of Defence in which the former functions of the Department of Army were largely inherited by a new Army Office.

In 1973 the Australian Army was itself re-organized with an internal restructuring of its units and operations.

In this context must be seen the operational records packed in Vietnam and returned to Australia — records of superior units now defunct: Headquarters Australian Force Vietnam (Saigon), Headquarters 1 Australian Task Force (Nui Dat), Headquarters 1 Australian Logistic Support Group (Vung Tau) — returned to a department itself by then defunct. Operational records, especially those of such recent date, contain, however, much information of immense value in planning for training and evaluating effectiveness of operations and equipment, and their importance justified their continuing availability to those involved in such planning. There was then no question of immediate transfer to archival custody.

It was, however, following their transfer ten years later to the Australian War Memorial that saw the most intensive search of these records. Indeed there can be few if any other instances of a search operation covering such a large quantity of records carried out over a sustained period.

Late in February 1982 information noted on a few files of the Headquarters 1 Australian Task Force Vietnam caused concern that the answer given as a result of previous searches of records undertaken in Army Office, might be incorrect. Given the controversial nature of the question itself and the requirement for a comprehensive knowledge of the information available, in lieu of an attempt, as before, to pinpoint records which by subject and title might be considered relevant, it was decided that the only satisfactory course would be to search all available records: a daunting prospect to consider, let alone to undertake.

The direction was that the search would be undertaken by personnel supplied from every branch throughout Army Office; that because a search of such magnitude would take considerable time, personnel could not be

released for the entire period involved, since routine work would need to continue as normal. Accordingly, those taking part were to spend a week on the search then return to their own work, to be replaced by others.

The project was organised and supervised by a team from the Directorate of Army Information Management, Army Office, under the direction of Lieutenant Colonel M.C. Peck who designed and co-ordinated the search and ultimately the writing and production of the report which resulted. The work was undertaken, by agreement with the Director of the Australian War Memorial, at the Annex to the Memorial at Mitchell, Canberra, where the records had been recently transferred from the Department of Defence. Teams of 30 officers, warrant officers and non-commissioned officers embarked on a page-by-page search of the records, each new group briefed each week on the method of operation and the nature of information to be noted. More than 120 in all took part over a period of three months.

An exhaustive search was made of every record transferred including control record cards, indexes, registers and transfer checklists, all of which provided cross checks and cross references against possible errors and omissions otherwise likely, given human error. Items which included any relevant information were extracted and the information evaluated. In addition, signals to all Army establishments and units in Australia directed that records held should be searched and information from any item relevant to the terms of the search be made available to Army Office.

Finally only those items which included significant data were left separate from other records in the group to facilitate reference. These provided the information on which the report of the search was based. Writing teams — an author with a research assistant — were then constituted. Personnel involved in this part of the project had already participated in the search and they were therefore aware of the methods of extracting and collating information and the context in which it had been compiled.

By request, those items on which the report was based remained separated and were constituted as a special artificial temporary series, the "Herbicide Series". This is, more accurately, sets of series since they reflect the parent series of unit records. Records extracted from, for example, Headquarters Australian Force Vietnam were retained as the Herbicide Series HQ AFV. In this way, the original series can be ultimately re-constituted or indeed can be at any time, either totally or for specific items as required.

The report produced on the basis of evidence from these records contradicts all previous statements made concerning possible use of chemicals by the Australian Army in Vietnam. It shows conclusively that in fact herbicides and insecticides were used, the latter fairly extensively.

All use of chemicals for whatever purpose by the Army in Vietnam is covered by information in the report. Agent Orange was used by Australian troops though apparently in a very limited way only. The report is stunning in its impact. It is remarkable because of the degree and intensity of effort involved in compiling it. To produce a consolidation of such a mass of information with the comprehensive documentation which accompanies it, is a tribute to those involved in the work. It can be seen that the resources in terms of manpower were considerable. In fact it is the resources on a personal level which individually and collectively make this an impressive piece of work produced under great pressure in an extraordinarily short time.

There are two further facets of the project, however, which exceed anything else in their impact. Firstly the report, contradicting as it does previous definite statements denying herbicide usage by Australian troops in Vietnam, has been made public with supporting evidence extensively documented. There have been other instances where such a contradiction would not have been made so available.

The import of the second facet cannot be overestimated. It is in terms of the artificial "Herbicide Series" that lies the real significance of this whole operation. The information revealed as a result of the file search and the report compiling the information are subsidiary to the reality of the primary source records — the "Herbicide Series" — being themselves made available for public access.

This would appear to be a landmark decision in government in Australia. In no other instance has there been such a sweeping demonstration of the desire to inform the public of the facts and of the sequence of events as recorded contemporaneously in official government records.

This decision is all the more important since it did not occur as a result of freedom of information legislation. It was not subsequent to public demand for access to relevant records following tabling of the report on use of chemicals. Nor was it construed as being a requirement under the Freedom of Information Act s.12 (2)(b) that documents deemed necessary for the understanding of the report be made available. It was always intended that the report itself would be a public document. As the operation proceeded, it was seen that given the comprehensive supporting documentation with citations of specific items, and a bibliography including all the items in the Herbicide Series, the intent to inform must include making available the source material.

Implementation of the decision for public release of records in the special series involved the identification of all documents of non-Australian origin and their clearance by the appropriate government, clearance for personal sensitivity and national security, and formal de-

classification of security-classified documents. A small percentage has remained restricted as a result of examination applying these criteria. The workload involved in the examination for release has been formidable and has been shared by staff from Army Office, the Department of Defence Archives and Historical Studies Section, and the Australian War Memorial.

Records as listed in the bibliography of the Army report were made available for public access at the Australian War Memorial Annex, Mitchell, concurrently with and from the date of tabling of, the Army report in the Parliament.

While they are superficially unrelated, and the fact of their being almost concurrent is pure coincidence, the two events, proclamation of the Freedom of Information Act on 1 December, and tabling of the Army Report with the simultaneous release of primary source records on 9 December 1982, deal with the same principle. There is, however, an essential difference. One provides freedom of information by legislation — the idea; the other provides freedom of information by intent — the ideal.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. *Report on the Use of Herbicides, Insecticides and other chemicals by the Australian Army in South Vietnam*. Compiled by Army Office, Department of Defence. Presented to the Parliament by the Rt. Hon Ian Sinclair, MP, Minister for Defence. Canberra December 1982.
2. Statement [to the Parliament] by the Rt. Hon. Ian Sinclair, MP, Minister for Defence. Canberra December 1982.
3. Commonwealth of Australia. *Freedom of Information Act 1982*
4. Commonwealth of Australia. *Australian War Memorial Act 1925*
5. Commonwealth of Australia. *Australian War Memorial Act 1980*