



STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MR. HAROLD HOLT
AT SYDNEY AIRPORT ON HIS RETURN FROM HIS TOUR OF
SOUTH EAST ASIA.

1st May, 1966

Well, gentlemen, I don't propose to say a great deal in detail here for very obvious and good reasons. The first is that just having come off a rather long and tiring flight after what has been a very heavy programme, literally more than sixteen hours a day in active operation of one kind or another, this is not the state of mind or body in which to make carefully considered statements about matters of the degree of importance that I have been dealing with. And the other good reason is that in these circumstances, the first detailed report I should be making is to my colleagues in Cabinet and then to the Parliament. I expect to be talking to my colleagues on Tuesday morning when we will have a meeting of Cabinet, and either that same day or on one of the later dates in the week, to Parliament.

But I can say in general terms that this journey has been one of the most rewarding experiences of a lifetime and I am going to derive tremendous benefit from it for myself personally in the strength of conviction it will bring to judgments and assessments of particular situations, and the value it will possess, I believe, for my colleagues as I am able to contribute on a better informed basis to our discussions on external and defence matters. There is no effective substitute, as most of us have discovered, for contact directly on the spot, either with a situation or with personalities, and this has proved very true in relation to the quite extensive journey I have undertaken. Although I have only been away from Australia for some ten days, we have covered discussions in four countries in that time and I must have visited twenty or more significant locations either of military operation or extensive governmental activity. For example, I have been talking about the Singapore naval base for many years but it wasn't until now that I was able to inspect it and get a thorough briefing on operations there, fly over the area by helicopter and come back with a pretty clear idea of what was going on there.

In Viet Nam, although the issues have been clear enough in my mind for a firm judgment to be made and for the government to have definite policies in relation to Viet Nam, it is only when you are on the spot and see for yourself what is going on, something of the atmosphere of the city, that these matters tend to fall into perspective. For example, you read day by day of episodes occurring in Saigon and people get the impression that the place is in a state of turmoil, that chaotic conditions exist in the city. Saigon has a population of just on two million people and it is rather like the reporting that goes on about a bushfire in Australia as read by somebody in London. They wonder whether we are all in a holocaust. Well, as we know, it could be occurring 1,500 miles from where we are. And in Saigon, life goes on - a little more hazardous than in some other places, but the life of the city goes on, affected by the disruptive action which the communists bring to it. For example, I was asking about their electricity supply, which is clearly inadequate for a city of that dimension, and they were telling me about the

hydro electric power which they had in the north, but every time they fixed it up, the Viet Cong cut the wires so they had no electricity from that hydro-electric station.

When you came to our own troops you get pictures from reading day by day accounts of what is going on there, of our troops having a very heavy time almost on an uninterrupted cycle of operations. Well, of course, this is not the way the Army functions. They do engage in operations of a very uncomfortable and dangerous kind, but then they come back to the camp. They are there in camp for refurbishing, refreshing and spending, some of them, a bit of time on rotation at Vung Tau which is the recreational seaside centre we have taken and equipped for just this very purpose. Some of their time they go out on their programmes of civic action to which we attach a good deal of importance as the positive constructive side of helping a people less fortunate and less able to look after themselves, and the need for this is clearly perceived and now determinedly pursued by the Government of South Viet Nam and by the American authorities concerned and by our own troops. But in a variety of ways, the reality differs from the impressions which one might have otherwise have gained. There are some things which one can report as definite improvements over what we have known before. The standard of the Army cooks has certainly improved since the last world war - not just because they turned it on for me but they explained that their cooks now go through food school training and they are a pretty keen lot. I had a buffet meal with the boys at Bien Hoa which I wouldn't have found surpassed at well, who will I give a boost to? the Chevron Hilton or the Southern Cross Hotel or any of these other illustrious establishments.

And another thing which represents a great improvement is that fatalities from battle casualties are occurring at only half the rate that occurred in Korea and the Second World War because thanks to this helicopter service, they get the wounded men out of the battle area to either a casualty station or a hospital in about less than half the time that they have ever been able to achieve in earlier battles.

There are various points of interest of that kind which one encounters and I merely mention them illustratively again to illustrate that all is not grim in the life that is led by the troops there.

I paid visits to Terendak and Butterworth two of our stations in Malaysia and they are most delightful camp establishments, lovely green lawns, swimming pools. At Terendak, the men had just left for their tour of duty in Borneo but I met some 450 wives there, in charming summer frocks with small children darting about in all directions. It was an indication of an aspect of military service which we don't normally read about and I merely mention these matters because I think that a journey of this sort does enable one to get a better balanced perspective.

But as to the main purpose, this, I think, has been well publicised. Originally my idea - and this goes back to my first days in office - was to seize the opportunity as early as it presented itself, of visiting our troops in the field.

This has now been done and I have, I think, visited most of the centres, if not all the principal centres in South East Asia in which we have our troops stationed. And I found them in splendid spirits with morale high. Those who had been there any length of time were, naturally enough, looking forward to coming back to Australia, but I found no indications of any dissatisfaction with conditions in the service or the life they were living. They were keen, alert, obviously enthusiastic about the job they were doing, with a clear idea - those that I talked to, anyhow - of the need for them being there and what the job was all about.

And when you reflect on it, in the four countries they have all been facing the same threat, perhaps in differing degree, and the degree of intensity has varied from time to time. It wasn't so long ago that it was the communist guerilla activity in Malaysia that was giving us the concern. The communist activity continues there as it does in Borneo. In Thailand they are concerned about increased communist probing and infiltration and, of course, you find it exemplified in its most active form currently in Viet Nam.

So that in the countries I visited, it was of great value to have talked closely, intimately with the heads of government and be taken completely into their confidence as to their view of things and the events occurring in their country.

I feel that Australia has strengthened its friendship in each of these areas and that this is one of the continuing dividends which we shall derive from the visit.

Now this is almost beginning to take the character of a report to Parliament and I said at the outset this was not to happen. But I feel encouraged by what I have seen. I hope to report fully on it to my fellow Australians, but I can say this with great certainty, that if they had gone through the same experience with me they would share my pride in the quality, character and ability of service which is being given by so many Australian men and some Australian women in these various theatres which I have visited.

I could just add, perhaps, a postscript about the National Servicemen. There were a few that I encountered who had gone forward either as special units or as part of some advance party, and both they and the men of the Regular Army were clearly going to get along very well together. They were welcomed by the Regular Army volunteers. I believe that the National Servicemen will add a chapter to Australian military history of which they will be proud and which we will come to applaud.
