



RG NEALE LECTURE SERIES

The fall of Saigon, 1975

Peter Edwards

1 May 2006

THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF AUSTRALIA
AND THE DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE



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Robert George Neale AO
1919–2004

The RG Neale Lecture Series was established in 2006 to commemorate Professor Robert George Neale's contribution to Australian scholarship and to acknowledge his tireless work in making historical documents available for research. The lecture will be presented each year by an acclaimed historian. It will focus on foreign policy issues, utilising the valuable foreign relations records that are publicly released each year by the National Archives of Australia.

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ROBERT GEORGE NEALE, 1919–2004

Professor Robert George Neale AO is noted for the significant contributions he made in the fields of history and archives in Australia. From 1975 to 1984 he served as the first Director-General of the Australian Archives (now the National Archives of Australia). Before that he was the first Editor of Historical Documents at the Department of Foreign Affairs, and was instrumental in founding a historical series on Australia's foreign policy.

Robert George (Bob) Neale was born in Werribee, Victoria, on 7 March 1919. He attended Melbourne Boys' High School, and graduated from the University of Melbourne with First Class Honours in History in 1939.

Bob Neale began his working life as a teacher in rural Victoria. During World War II, he enlisted in the Second Australian Imperial Force and served in New Guinea. At the end of the war he joined the History Department at the University of Queensland. He became a Professor in 1965, the same year his work *British and American Imperialism 1898–1900* was published.

In 1970 Professor Neale was appointed Editor of Historical Documents in the Department of Foreign Affairs in Canberra. One of his enduring legacies in that role was publication of the series *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy 1937–39*, which fulfilled an important goal: informing citizens about how Australia's foreign policy was formulated. Professor Neale's expertise as a historian and academic translated into rapid advancement in the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Australian Public Service.

In 1975 Professor Neale was appointed the first Director-General of the Australian Archives. He was asked to carry out recommendations made in the report *Development of the National Archives*, by Canadian archivist Dr W Kaye Lamb, and spent the next eight years turning a small and relatively inconspicuous organisation into a nationally recognised institution, providing high quality recordkeeping and archival services to the Australian Government and people. Under his leadership, the Archives took many new initiatives and grew substantially, becoming a world-leader in archival and recordkeeping practices.

As Director-General, Professor Neale oversaw the drafting of the Archives Bill, later enacted as the *Archives Act 1983*. This landmark legislation established the Archives on a statutory basis and laid down stringent conditions for public access to, and the disposal of, Commonwealth records. Professor Neale was also instrumental in obtaining suitable accommodation for the Archives' collection and staff. His skill, tenacity, diplomacy and foresight ensured that Australia gained an enduring national archival institution.

Professor Neale retired as Director-General of the Australian Archives in March 1984 and was created an Officer of the Order of Australia in the Australia Day Honours of 1985. He died on 1 May 2004.

The fall of Saigon, 1975

by Dr Peter Edwards AM

DELIVERED AT THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF AUSTRALIA

ON 1 MAY 2006

We Australians often focus our historical discussions on anniversaries, especially anniversaries of dates relating to Australian involvement in wars. Yesterday, 30 April, was the 31st anniversary of the fall of Saigon, the capitulation of the government of the Republic of Vietnam (in common parlance, South Vietnam) that marked the end of the Vietnam War. Today, 1 May, is the second anniversary of the death of Robert Neale, and therefore doubly appropriate as the date for the inaugural lecture that bears his name.

Let me first congratulate the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the National Archives of Australia on establishing this occasion and for the honour of being invited to give the inaugural lecture. To mark the release of DFAT documents under the 30-year rule embodied in the *Archives Act 1983*, the two agencies have decided to commission an annual lecture on a topic directly related to the documents concerned. For DFAT, the RG Neale Lecture reflects a continuing commitment to encouraging well-informed debate on historical issues in Australian foreign policy. For the National Archives, it demonstrates a commitment to preserving, and making available for public use, the records of the Australian Government. The annual release of Cabinet records each January is well known, but on many episodes the Cabinet records tell at most only a small part of the story. One needs to study the records of individual departments to have some grasp of, in Ranke's famous phrase, *wie*

es eigentlich gewesen, how it actually was. In recent decades perhaps no year has demonstrated that principle more clearly than 1975, the year not only of the fall of Saigon but also of the loans affair, the Indonesian incursion into East Timor, and the dismissal of the Whitlam Government.

It is especially appropriate to name this occasion after RG 'Bob' Neale, the first Editor of Historical Documents in the Department of Foreign Affairs and then the first Director-General of the Australian Archives. My debt to him is both personal and professional, as he was also my first boss. My first tenured job after completing my postgraduate studies was in the newly formed Historical Section in Foreign Affairs. He had a considerable impact in forming my ideas of what a historian should be. There was a time once when the public image of a historian was of a pipe-smoking chap in a tweed jacket with leather elbow-patches, earnestly discussing the tactics of Caesar or Napoleon. More recently, when we have heard less about war histories and more of the history wars, I suspect that historians are seen by many as incorrigible controversialists, always prepared for the next television interview, and driven more by ideological agendas and the desire for publicity than by scrupulous attention to accurate evidence and balanced interpretation. Bob Neale fitted neither of these caricatures. I believe that I speak also for my former colleagues in Foreign Affairs, Heather Kenway and Jim Stokes, in saying that he was an exemplar in two important ways. Whereas most historians, whether in universities or self-employed, work as individuals, Bob Neale was a gifted team leader, who shared credit as well as responsibility and who inspired loyalty by giving it. Secondly, he was, literally and metaphorically, the historian in the grey flannel suit, the public servant historian who respected, and gained the respect of, senior public servants. He admired those who subscribed to the ethos of giving frank and non-partisan

advice to ministers, respecting the policy directions of the government of the day but not seeking to bury unpleasant truths beneath layers of political spin. One mark of this reciprocal respect was the fact that the Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Sir Keith Waller, invited Bob Neale to attend the regular meetings of senior departmental officials, known irreverently as ‘morning prayers’.

The newly released documents contain an excellent example of his approach. Those of you with a longstanding interest in the history of Australia’s involvement in the Vietnam War may recall that in 1975 Neale was commissioned by Prime Minister Gough Whitlam to write a paper on the way in which Australia had entered the commitment in 1965. Whitlam was especially interested in the question of the existence of a formal request for Australian troops from the government of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) in Saigon. Few, I suspect, are aware that Neale had been requested for advice on the same question in 1971 by the McMahon Government, which of course had a totally different policy on the war.

Let me recall the context. In mid-1971 the biggest news story in the world was the United States Supreme Court decision to permit the *New York Times* to publish the so-called Pentagon Papers, a classified documentary study of the American commitment to Vietnam. Because that study was based on Defense Department documents, not those of the State Department or the White House, it said little about the involvement of Australia and other ‘third countries’, but one document suggested that Washington had generated a South Vietnamese ‘request’ to Australia for an infantry battalion. The Labor Party Opposition, which had long held suspicions concerning the authenticity of the ‘request’ of which Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies had told Parliament

in 1965, seized on this point. They were also suspicious of the emphasis that the Liberal-Country Party coalition government had long placed on the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation, or SEATO, with the implication that Australia’s commitment to Vietnam emerged from its commitments under the Manila Treaty that created SEATO. The Labor Party suspected that Australia’s commitment owed little to either a genuine South Vietnamese request or to SEATO plans and obligations, but was essentially a reaction to American pressure on both Saigon and Canberra.

In Foreign Affairs, the departmental secretary, Sir Keith Waller, asked Neale to prepare a report based on the department’s records. The minute that Neale prepared for Waller was an admirably clear summary of the principal issues, both decisive and nuanced. ‘The documents show conclusively’, Neale stated, ‘that Australian troops were not sent to South Vietnam in response to a request from the Government of that country’. Nevertheless he observed that ‘the Australian Government had always insisted that the despatch of troops to South Vietnam must be acceptable to that government’, and there were clear indications that, despite some qualms, the Australian commitment was on balance welcomed by the South Vietnamese authorities. Neale stated that there was some evidence to the effect that South Vietnam had been pressed by the United States to agree to the presence of Australian troops, but not for any suggestion that Australia had been ‘tricked’ by American manipulation. On the question of SEATO, Neale averred that ‘Australian troops were not sent to South Vietnam as part of or in response to SEATO Council planning’. The Americans, he noted, had always resisted Australian pressure to place the Vietnam commitment under the machinery of SEATO.

Neale's minute could not present a fully comprehensive account of the circumstances surrounding the Australian commitment, but he pointed to many of the elements that aroused deep concerns in the Australian Government in 1965. These included the frequent coups and constant instability in Saigon, the conviction that the war could not be won by current approaches, American vacillation over political and military strategies, and Australia's reluctance to disperse its limited military power at a time when Indonesia was seen as a potential threat to both New Guinea and Malaysia. In this context, Neale noted, Australia made what amounted to an offer to the United States of a battalion to serve in Vietnam, before any formal request had been made. In the circumstances, he concluded, this was a 'logical extension of Australian post-war foreign policy' and one which reflected 'a policy independently arrived at by the Australian Government'. Moreover, Neale attached to his minute an analysis, prepared by Heather Kenway, of the Australian press coverage of the 1965 commitment. This, as Neale summarised it, showed that the Australian press, and therefore their readers, had been well aware that the commitment had arisen from the Australian-American relationship and not from any request from Saigon.

Therefore, when in May 1975, soon after the defeat of the South Vietnamese government, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam commissioned Neale to prepare a paper on the Australian commitment ten years earlier, he was reiterating a task that Neale had already carried out several years earlier, when Whitlam was still Leader of the Opposition. Neale's 1975 paper was essentially an amplification of his 1971 minute. Whitlam tabled it in Parliament but did not have it widely circulated or published as a parliamentary paper. I cannot comment on his motives, but can offer a few observations on reading both the 1971 minute

and the 1975 paper after this interval. Whitlam and his party would have been very pleased with Neale's unequivocal conclusions concerning the South Vietnam 'request' and the relationship of the commitment to the SEATO alliance. But Neale's equally firm statements that the despatch of Australian troops to Vietnam represented an independent Australian government decision, not manipulation by the Americans, and that the public was well aware of the real circumstances, would have been less welcome. To publish the paper might have raised questions about the wisdom of Labor's concentration on the important but limited and technical question of the South Vietnamese 'request', rather than issues of broader and more enduring importance – issues, for example, like the role of the American alliance in shaping Australian foreign policy, and the ability of Australian leaders to manage the alliance so as to maximise the benefits and minimise the costs to Australia. As Henry Kissinger once remarked, it is unwise to enter a blame game on Vietnam, for there is more than enough blame to go around.

All of this is a reminder that history, especially the history of controversial episodes such as the Vietnam commitment, operates simultaneously at several, often overlapping and interacting, levels. Some, with strong partisan or ideological convictions, look upon history as a sort of vast ammunition dump, from which they can extract weapons with which to defend their cause and to attack that of their opponents. Some, not least those in positions of cultural dominance, seek to establish an approved and heroic narrative, a quasi-biblical text for the national ideology that Rousseau called a nation's 'civil religion'. In recent years this has aroused comment in Australia when the Prime Minister makes comments in the context of the 'history wars' or when Asian nations object to the content of Japanese textbooks. In fact it is a practice as old as

history itself – indeed older than written history, if we consider the Celtic bards or the poets of ancient Greek city-states. Others again, including those in the rather beleaguered category of professional historian, see history as a never-ending conversation, a debate, as someone has called it, between the present and the past about the future. The questions that we ask of the past reflect our present and future concerns, as we try incessantly to understand more about the human condition, to work out what remains constant and what is subject to change, be it political change, economic change, cultural change, technological change or any other form of change.

So today, when we look at an episode like the fall of Saigon in 1975, we know what has happened in the intervening decades, we are aware of our current concerns and controversies, and we are conscious of our hopes and fears for the future. What, then, do the documents of the then Department of Foreign Affairs relating to the fall of Saigon in 1975 mean to us in 2006? Let me suggest three areas where there is historical grist for our present-day mills. We are today a nation much concerned with controversies surrounding refugees and asylum-seekers; with controversies surrounding a highly problematic overseas conflict in which we are involved as a close ally of the United States; and with controversies arising from our longstanding efforts to understand the countries to our north and to establish peaceful, positive and mutually beneficial relationships with them.



The most obvious resonance, perhaps, is the political furore that developed around the fate of people generally, if loosely, described as ‘refugees’.

As some of you may recall, there was a vigorous public controversy over whether Australia should admit Vietnamese who, for one reason or another, did not want to live under the victorious communist regime. It is a controversy that has been revisited several times since then. The records show that there were in fact several interlocking issues. Should we admit the very small number of Vietnamese people who had worked for the Australian embassy in Saigon? Should we admit South Vietnamese diplomats and other senior officials, located in Canberra or in other regional capitals, where they had represented a government that no longer existed? Should we admit a number of babies and small children from Saigon’s orphanages, for whom there were many Australians willing to become adoptive parents? Or should we admit the substantially greater number of Vietnamese who were already fleeing that country in all manner of boats, many far from seaworthy, and arriving in ports like Singapore, from whence they hoped to find safe haven in countries like Australia?

The Foreign Affairs records provide much of the background story to the highly public and controversial disputes. We see the department preparing, and sometimes modifying, its advice to the government as new developments emerged day by day. We see that the real maker of Australian policy was the Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, rather than the Foreign Minister, Senator Don Willesee, or the Immigration Minister, Clyde Cameron. We see Whitlam issuing edicts and instructions from one capital after another because, as so often, he was travelling overseas at the time this crisis arose. And we see the Australian ambassador in Saigon, Geoffrey Price, caught between horrific political and moral pressures, while he and his staff struggled to operate in a capital facing imminent defeat and while he tried to comply with instructions

from Canberra that in many cases he thought were shameful, contradictory or impossible of achievement. We see the embassy finally obliged to close down, ironically on Anzac Day, the 60th anniversary of Australia's most celebrated military campaign.

How do we in 2006 read these documents created more than 30 years ago? We are now conscious of the events of 2001, surrounding the MV *Tampa* and the 'certain maritime incident' better known as the 'children overboard' affair. With that in mind, we see the irony of a Labor prime minister taking a hard line against asylum-seekers, while a Liberal opposition leader proclaims this attitude to be hard-hearted and shameful. It is as if we can hear those familiar words, 'We will determine who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come', being uttered in Gough Whitlam's unmistakable tones. These points have been made before, but I wonder if we have fully understood the effect that this episode had on domestic politics. The 'loans affair' and subsequent crisis that precipitated the dismissal of the Whitlam Government was a matter of domestic policy, but the government's authority had relied heavily on its record in foreign policy. The Vietnam War in particular had allowed Labor to present itself as the party that best understood world, and especially Asian, affairs. But the refugee issue, and other controversies surrounding the fall of Saigon, removed much of that authority. Now it was the Liberals, led by Malcolm Fraser, a former Minister for the Army and Minister for Defence during the war, who were claiming the moral high ground, while Labor appeared to be politically, diplomatically and morally inept.

In the last month we have witnessed a debate in this country, prompted by the arrival on our shores of asylum-seekers from the Indonesian province of West

Papua, concerning the conflicting demands of foreign policy considerations and international conventions on refugees. With this in mind, there is a certain resonance in reading the Foreign Affairs documents of 1975. Here we see Whitlam urging Foreign Affairs officials not to mistrust the assurances from the communist authorities in Hanoi and the 'Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam' that the people of South Vietnam had nothing to fear from their new rulers. The tensions between foreign policy and a humanitarian attitude to asylum-seekers were all too apparent. The two situations, 1975 and 2006, are not exactly parallel, but to immerse oneself in these records is to be reminded that, as Mark Twain once put it, history does not repeat itself, but sometimes it rhymes.

There is a wider sense in which Australians in 2006 look at these events with different eyes from those at the time. We now look back on the events surrounding the fall of Saigon aware that Australia did indeed accept many 'boat people' and later a more orderly system of immigration from Indochina. We know that today Australia has a substantial population of people of Indo-Chinese origin. This has an undoubted influence on the way in which we look back at the Vietnam War. A year ago many newspapers devoted extensive space to articles marking the 30th anniversary of the fall of Saigon. What was strikingly different in this coverage, compared with similar exercises in the immediate aftermath of the war, was the impact made by Australians of Vietnamese origin. Individuals, including former diplomats and officers of the former South Vietnamese regime, and their families told their stories, and in the process wove a new strand into the fabric of the Australian national narrative. We now see veterans of the former South Vietnamese army marching on Anzac Day; we have seen a joint Australian-South Vietnamese memorial

opened at the Dandenong RSL in suburban Melbourne. All this has established a new, subordinate but not insignificant, element within Australia's civil religion, the Anzac legend.

That leads me to mention another sense in which we in 2006 look back on 1975 with a different perspective. In the late 1990s, DFAT decided that its contribution to the Centenary of Federation in 2001 would be a history of Australia's engagement with Asia during the 20th century, a history that emerged as two volumes under the title *Facing North*. In this study the mid-1970s, not least the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, appears as a turning-point, a reorientation of Australia's approach to its relations with Asia. We can look at one topic in the Foreign Affairs documents of 1975 as a record of one important part of that reorientation. Then, as so often in the past hundred years, many Australians discussed our relations with Asia. Some asserted that 'Australia is part of Asia', but this only prompted further questions. What is 'Asia'? How well do we understand Asia, and the various political, social and economic forces operating there? During the Vietnam War one aspect of this enduring question was the identity of the enemy. Was it the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) or North Vietnam? Or was Hanoi merely a proxy for either China or the Soviet Union? And what of the National Liberation Front (NLF) of South Vietnam, commonly called the Viet Cong? Was this really an expression of autonomous rebellion in the south, or was it little more than an arm of the DRV in Hanoi?

In these documents these issues take the form of debate about the role of the so-called Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam (or PRG), formed by the NLF. This was a topic on which there was sharp

dissension even within the Labor Government, with much attention focused on the controversial views of Dr Jim Cairns. Although Cairns was by this time the deputy prime minister, his efforts to give a greater degree of official recognition to the PRG were more in tune with the extra-parliamentary anti-war movement than with the hard-headed members of his own party and Cabinet. Cairns was soon made to appear naive when, a few months after the fall of Saigon, Hanoi brushed aside the PRG, asserted that its claim that the PRG was genuinely independent was just a propaganda tactic, and united the country under the title of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. But while it is easy to point to the readiness of some on the Left to accept the propaganda of the communist side, we should also remember that the conservative coalition had been rightly criticised for its crude oversimplification of the relationship between Hanoi and Beijing. In all, in terms of Australia's relations with the countries to its north, we should now see the Vietnam War, and especially the fall of Saigon and its immediate aftermath, as a sobering and many-faceted lesson in the complexities of engaging with Asia.



We can draw somewhat similar lessons with respect to the other fundamental plank of Australian foreign and defence policy, the alliance with the United States. Today, of course, we are all too aware that we are once again engaged, as an ally of the United States, in a highly controversial military commitment that may prove to be disastrous. The comparisons between Iraq today and Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s have been much discussed since 2003, and the Foreign Affairs documents here remind us of

both the similarities and the contrasts. Yes, the United States is once again involved in a dangerous commitment far from its own shores, running the risk of a humiliating failure to achieve its ends. Such a failure could seriously damage not only its own international standing but also that of its close ally in both conflicts, Australia. But in Vietnam the United States was defending the status quo, and defending a democracy – or at least a regime which, for all its flaws, at least aspired to democratic respectability and was opposed to the greatest anti-democratic force of the day, militant communism. The United States entered the conflict, and remained committed despite the enormous cost in blood and treasure, largely to maintain its reputation as a steadfast ally, a great power that would stand by its commitments to smaller powers that faced major strategic threats. Given the importance of the Australia, New Zealand, and the United States (ANZUS) Treaty commitment to Australian security, that was no small matter for us. The intervention in Iraq, on the other hand, is an attempt not to defend the status quo but to transform it, an effort not to support an existing alliance commitment nor to defend a putative democracy, but to impose democracy and to create a friendly regime by force of arms. The challenge in Iraq is, to put it mildly, rather greater than that in Vietnam.



With those contrasts as well as the comparisons in mind, it might be worth revisiting the fall of Saigon to consider what might happen if – and I emphasise if – the worst should happen in Baghdad. Those who care about Australia's place in the world, and especially those concerned for the future of the Australian–American alliance, would do well to reflect on the

possibilities. Might we see, for example, a 'post-Iraq syndrome', similar to the 'post-Vietnam syndrome' that affected American foreign policy until the early 1990s? One manifestation of the 'post-Vietnam syndrome' was the Nixon doctrine, by which the United States indicated that its allies would have to fend for themselves rather more and rely on American assistance rather less. But would a 'post-Iraq syndrome' necessarily take the same form? On the one hand, the United States might once again become distinctly wary of overseas ventures. On the other, might there perhaps be a greater willingness to listen to allies and a greater reluctance to take unilateral action? There are some signs of this in the foreign policy of the second administration of President George W Bush. In some recent statements of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Iraq, there are also some interesting echoes of the statements made during the Reagan administration in the 1980s, seeking to reconcile the American people to the outcome of the Vietnam commitment. I do not know what a 'post-Iraq syndrome' might look like, but it is a question worth asking, not least for American allies like Australia.

This leads me to consider another aspect of Australia's relations with the world in which the fall of Saigon was a turning point – our strategic policy, the way in which we decide whether to become involved, or to avoid becoming involved, in armed conflict. Just as the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942 marked the end of more than two decades of the 'Singapore strategy', so the fall of Saigon marked the end of more than two decades of the strategy known as 'forward defence'. Under this doctrine Australia based its commitments, force structures, equipment and tactics on the assumption that we would fight alongside British and American forces

in South-East Asia. The aim was to ensure that the newly independent nations emerging from European colonial rule would establish pro-Western, or at least neutral, governments rather than regimes that supported the communist giants, the Soviet Union and China. For most of the 1950s and 1960s, in several conflicts and potential conflicts, this seemed to work well. But South Vietnam proved to be a poor place at which to draw a line in the sand. This, as Coral Bell has pointed out, is where Iraq and Vietnam have the greatest similarity – the right global war, the wrong choice of battlefield.

The fall of Saigon marked the end of ‘forward defence’ as a credible doctrine. In the subsequent years Australia developed a new approach, expressed in a series of White Papers on defence, beginning with the first in 1976 and continuing to the most recent in 2000. Throughout this quarter-century, behind the White Papers and the strategic reviews and other official statements, one could often discern the shadows of Saigon in 1975, the images of the helicopters leaving from the roof of the American embassy. The implications were that alliances with great powers carried costs as well as benefits, that we needed to focus our defence efforts on the immediate approaches to the Australian continent, that we needed to place more emphasis on self-reliance in our defence. (In some of the recent commentary on this topic, incidentally, it is often suggested that the ‘self-reliant defence of Australia’ approach emerged in the 1980s, especially in the Dibb report of 1986 and Kim Beazley’s White Paper the following year. The concepts were developed in that time, but they originated with papers and studies prepared in the 1970s, before but especially after the fall of Saigon.)

In the last five or ten years, these strategic doctrines have faced a major challenge, as powerful voices have argued that we must defend not only our territory and our regional interests, but also our liberal democratic values, wherever in the world they may come under attack. I do not wish to enter into that debate here. I just hope that I have said enough about our relations with the United States, our relations with our Asian neighbours, and our strategic doctrines, to suggest that this is a particularly appropriate time to revisit the events of 1975 and their aftermath, and to reconsider the implications of those events for Australia’s relations with the world in 2006 and beyond.

I have been looking at some of the very broad implications of the fall of Saigon in 1975, matters on which the Foreign Affairs documents have the potential to cast new light. But there are other stories in these documents illustrating the tragedy and the trivia of diplomatic life. Last week, on Anzac Day, Australians commemorated those who fell serving the nation in war or peacekeeping operations. It is well to be reminded that those in military uniform are not the only ones who have fallen in the nation’s service. By early 1975, Australia had opened a diplomatic mission in North Vietnam as well as the embassy in South Vietnam. In March, Graeme Lewis, the chargé d’affaires in Hanoi, flew to Vientiane to meet David Wilson, who was about to become the first ambassador in Hanoi. Lewis then took an Air Vietnam flight to Saigon, the flight path of which passed over Pleiku in the central highlands, where the communist forces were pressing forward their final, successful offensive. What happened is unclear, but it appears that the civilian aeroplane may have been mistaken, by one side or the other, for an enemy military aircraft and been hit by an anti-aircraft rocket. In any event the plane and all

aboard disappeared, with Graeme Lewis as one of the fatalities. We could say, perhaps, that a Foreign Affairs officer was the last Australian casualty of the Vietnam War. I can recall attending the memorial service in Canberra for Lewis and the considerable feeling among diplomats at the time that single officers should not be exposed to greater risks than their colleagues with family responsibilities.

Diplomats have to deal with the trivial as well as events bearing on the fate of nations. One of the curious legacies of the end of the government in Saigon was the fate of its embassy and related properties in Canberra. The Protocol section of the Department of Foreign Affairs had the responsibility of minding these properties until they could be handed over to the successor regime, the victorious North. I was impressed by the views expressed, during this period, by one young member of the Protocol section at the costs charged by the Australian Capital Territory authorities for mowing the lawns at the old South Vietnamese embassy. Thirty dollars, he thought, was 'outrageous', showing a commendable concern for the (federal) taxpayer's dollar. That young protocol officer is today ending his term as our ambassador in Belgrade. Perhaps he feels that he has had more than enough experience in dealing with the aftermath of internecine wars.



There are, then, many reasons why it would be worthwhile to revisit the fall of Saigon in 1975, and especially to use the documents of the then Department of Foreign Affairs, now held by and available at the National Archives, as a window into the issues and implications of the events of

that time. We would, I suggest, gain most if we approach those documents with the commitment to rigorous research and independent, non-partisan assessment that characterised the work, as both historian and archivist, of Robert George Neale.



DR PETER EDWARDS AM

The inaugural RG Neale lecture was given by Dr Peter Edwards AM, a consultant historian and author who specialises in Australian defence and foreign policy. He is a Visiting Professor of the University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy.

Peter Edwards is a graduate of the Universities of Western Australia and Oxford. His first tenured position after completing his doctoral studies was under RG Neale in the newly formed Historical Section in the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Peter Edwards has published extensively on 20th-century history, principally on Australian foreign policy, Europe between the world wars, and Australian–American relations. He has held a Rhodes Scholarship, a Harkness Fellowship, and visiting fellowships at universities and other institutions in Australia and overseas. Dr Edwards was made a Member of the Order of Australia in 2001 for his work as official historian of Australia's involvement in South-East Asian conflicts 1948–75.



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